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Foes In Law



Rhoda Broughton

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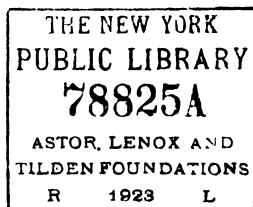
Author of "Cometh up as a Flower," "Good-bye, Sweetheart!"
etc., etc.

"God be with you; let us meet as little as we can!"

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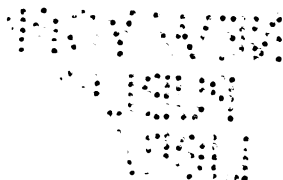
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FOES IN LAW

CHAPTER I

THE morning-room is comfortable, but so are not its occupants—only two—of whom the one has within the last five minutes sprung a mine upon the other. It must have been inside this small time-limit since the clock on the narrow eighteenth-century mantelpiece had struck the half-hour, while the footmen were carrying in the last lamp and dropping the last curtain. This had happened before the catastrophe, and the index is now only midway between the figures that indicate respectively five and twenty and twenty to six. Yet within that interval the relations between the two persons, lately lounging in the comfortable ease of established intimacy in their several arm-chairs, has undergone an earthquake change. She will never forget that, instead of a cup of tea, he has asked her for herself; and he will probably always remember that she has kindly, and not very firmly, declined. He has risen, and is standing with his back to the fire, sadly and absently parting his clerical coat-tails with an unconscious aspiration after warmth of some kind, if not of the particular quality he has demanded.

The girl is looking at him with a troubled, but not

quite ungratified astonishment; the puppy is finishing the bark which the young man's emotionally raised tones had started; and the parrot is laughing cynically. Though shrouded for the night, and thus reduced to the mere evidence of his ears, he knows what has happened.

"I was never so surprised in my life."

"Were not you?"

"We were talking of—what?"—seeking to recover the penultimate topic which now looks blue with distance—"of the Church Congress, and suddenly, without any warning, you were in the middle of this."

"Yes."

"I was never so surprised in my life." The repetition is bald, and she feels it so; yet only reiteration can relieve her. "I feel as if it must be, somehow, my fault."

He shakes his head, but not with emphasis.

"I never was so surpr——"

Perhaps he can't bear the third repetition of her phrase; for he breaks into, though only to appropriate, it.

"I was surprised too."

Her fair eyebrows, darker only by a shade than her blonde hair, mount from straight lines into arches.

"Surprised! You!"

"Yes, at my own want of self-control."

"It was not a new idea, then?" she asks, with a hesitating curiosity. "You had wanted to say it before?"

"Hundreds of times."

"How very odd!"

"I do not quite see where the eccentricity comes in."

A note of soreness bids her bridle her amazement; and a very kind heart dictates an explaining of it away.

"I should have as little suspected my real brother. We have always been like bro——"

"Do not descend to such a platitude," he says irritably. "As long as man is man, and woman, woman, there will never be any brothers and sisters except by blood."

This dogma is uttered as authoritatively as if it had been launched from the pulpit under which his hearer weekly sits; but clerical thunderbolts have proverbially lost some of their old splitting and searing power, and it is not without spirit that she rejoins—

"But we have always been Randal and Lettice; since the old days when I dug in the sands with you at Margate, we have always been Randal and Lettice."

"I fail to see what bearing that has upon the fact of my love for you."

"And though, of course, there was a gap in our relations, while you were at Eton and Oxford, yet when you took the curacy here we seemed to pick up our old threads just where we had dropped them."

"Seemed to you, perhaps."

"I must have been obtuse, but I give you my word of honour I had not the least suspicion. I wish"—with a renewal of her former half-fascinated curiosity—"that you would give me an idea when this—this notion began to enter your head."

His eyes flash angrily. "If your only wish is to 'peep and botanize' over my sufferings, I do not see what end is gained by my staying longer."

As he speaks he sends a glance through the not particularly well-lit room towards the chair where he had laid his hat and stick; but her voice, nearly as indignant as his own, and her candid eyes arrest his further action.

"I have not the least wish to 'peep and botanize' over your sufferings"—the veiled parrot chuckles, pleased at the phrase—"but you have taken my breath away; and it would be nonsense to pretend that you have not."

"If it is only the novelty of the idea"—his eye releasing his hat, and with an obvious postponement of the intention of departure—"you would soon get used to that."

"I do not think so."

But there is no great certainty in her voice, while her look wanders irresolutely from the Hoppner ancestress let into the panel over the fireplace to the Herodias which for the last two hundred years has brazenly announced itself as a Leonardo.

He drops his coat-tails, and makes a forward step off the hearthrug.

"Where there is already perfect sympathy——"

"Perfect—no."

He reshapes his plea. "When two people have as much in common as you and I—you will not, I suppose, deny that we have a good deal in common?"

"No, oh no; indeed we have!"

"Since I came I have even been an important factor in your life?"

"I should be most ungrateful to deny it."

"We each supplement the other"—with growing enthusiasm, and accompanying the statement by a second step forward; the third will land him at her side—"each supplying what the other lacks. You would give me ballast. I am conscious of my deficiency in it; my action to-day proves, as I told you just now, my want of self-control"—he lingers for a moment over this confession of his frailties, as if it were not wholly disagreeable to him—"while I——" He pauses, as if not quite sure how to word the coming phrase. "You will not misunderstand me when I say that you are not pre-eminently imaginative."

"I know I am not."

"Well, perhaps I might sometimes give your thoughts the wings they lack."

He throws his shoulders back and his head up.

She looks down, too unaffectedly humble to resent his estimate of the amount possessed by her of intellect's highest quality, but there is certainty in the shake of her flaxen head.

"All that is not enough."

"Enough!" The impetus of the protest sends him over the yard that parts them with a suddenness that makes her jump. "Do you suppose that that is all?"

His voice goes up at the last word with an accent of pregnant scorn; and once again the puppy barks, jumping down this time off Lettice's lap to do it better. The lover's foot sketches a movement towards kicking the little woolly interruption aside; but he recollects himself in time, and goes on as if

he were not aware of the second that is being sung to his love-chant.

"It is always when one needs it most that the power of expression fails one. But if I could make you understand; if I were not daunted by your coldness—it is a beautiful thing in its way, but I have often felt it like a wall of snow between us—I could tell you——"

He stops, struggling with a real difficulty in utterance.

"What could you tell me?"

Her limpid eyes are full of a thrilled curiosity as she asks the question with something of the delightful guilty quiver of a child peeping into a forbidden cupboard. Considering her good looks and her twenty-two years, the commonplaces of a declaration sound strangely original in her ears.

"I can tell you this, that my feeling for you, which began by lifting, has ended by lowering me. You are blighting me—blighting my work. You must have noticed the change from Sunday to Sunday. How starved and halting my utterances have become!"

"You are always miles above the average!" she answers, with a sweet openness of commendation intended to take any sting out of the partial acquiescence in his self-depreciation which follows. "But I have noticed that of late you have not been quite up to your usual mark. I attributed it to the effects of influenza."

"Did you?" he says, in a wounded voice at the prosaic nature of her explanation. "I had thought that you might have divined me better."

She shakes her head apologetically.

"At first," he pursues in a feverish egotism of retrospection, "nay, for many months you were an untold help to me, an impetus, an impulsion! The knowledge that your serious eyes were upon me, that your clear brain was following me point by point, keeping up with me when I was painfully conscious of having outstripped all the rest of the congregation——"

"I think you are sometimes rather above their heads," she puts in gently.

The interruption checks him for a moment; then he goes off again at score.

"But now—now—of late, the sensation of your nearness paralyzes me."

"You ought not to be aware that I am there."

"I am thankful when you are not," retorts he, violently, smarting under the low-voiced rebuke. "A few Sundays ago, when your place was empty——"

"I had a touch of influ——" she begins, but breaks off before finishing the offensive word.

"I blessed God for it! I breathed freer."

She looks up with an expression of half-attracted, half-repelled wonder at the clean-shaved, finely cut face, quivering with nervous excitement above her, marvelling that her own charms, which she has always considered of so jog-trot and ineffective an order, or of which, to speak more exactly, she has hitherto thought so little at all, can have wrought such an alarming yet interesting transfiguration in the fellow sand-digger of seventeen years ago, and the platonic teacher and comrade of the last twelve months.

"I am not of the stuff of which ascetics are

made," he says, with an erotic flash of his dark eyes that renders the assertion almost superfluous. "With me, when the heart is starved the intellect declines too. I need the blessedness of earthly love to help me up the path of high endeavour. Think, think twice before, without any adequate reason—and you have given me no reason worth the name—you refuse it me!"

The stringency of his urging, the imperative amateness of his look, fill her with a discomfort that has yet an element of high excitement in it. The double feeling expresses itself in a slight pushing back of her chair to increase the distance between them, and a hesitating quiver in the voice that repeats her refusal.

"I can't give you what I have not got."

"How do you know that you have not got it?" he cries, unconsciously recovering the lost advantage of extreme proximity, and lifting his tone again till the sleepy puppy gives a suppressed "Wuff!" "How do you know what unused treasures you may have been icily keeping under lock and key? Are you quite, quite sure that from far, far down in your being your heart is not crying out to mine, as mine is to yours?"

The sensation that his eyes are literally boring her through has become so overpowering that she jumps up from her chair, dropping from her lap as she does so the forgotten pet, who gives an injured squeak; and, taking her lover's forsaken place on the hearthrug, faces and answers him with a collect-edness that seems easier now that he is no longer hovering over her like a hawk over a mouse.

"I am quite sure."

"Thank you!"

The gratitude expressed has something of the ironic quality of the hawker whose challenge to buy his wares has been refused, and there is an oppressive silence; it might be a final one, if the woman could leave the crisis to end itself, but that is just what she cannot bear to do.

"You must not think that I under-estimate what you have been to me," she says, with a thrill in her voice, which might revive the spirits of a less self-confident person than the one addressed—"the way in which you have enriched my life, by your teaching, your books, your readings." She pauses with a half-aghast question to herself as to whether by her present action she is knocking on the head all the intellectual pleasures to which she alludes. "But even if I had for you the sort of—of overwhelming feeling that you wish, and which I do not even understand——"

She looks up at him questioningly, her cool fairness troubled. He is on the hearthrug too by this time.

"If you would let me, I could make you comprehend it."

His voice is unrecognizable, and somehow her hands have got into his.

"I do not want you to try"—extracting them, but not easily. "If you succeeded—I do not think you would—but if you did it would be disastrous."

"Disastrous?"

"Yes, disastrous. I mean nothing could come of it."

The homely matter-of-factness of her phrase jars upon him, and her freed hands make him angry.

"I fail to follow you."

"You are asking me to marry you," she says, lifting the perfect honesty of her simple yet not vapid face to his. "Well, I am not going to marry."

This time he does really kick the puppy, though not intentionally, but merely as a protest made by all his ireful muscles against her sentence.

"Is this a specimen of the cant of the day?"

The incivility of the phrase raises her colour and sends up her head.

"It is not cant. I shall not marry, simply because there is no room for marriage in my life."

Her sudden gentle stiffness warns him that he has exceeded the limits of ill-temper allowed even to a sufferer toasting on the gridiron of a refusal.

"Then you are going to sacrifice your whole life to a Quixotism?"

"If you like to call it so."

A silence falls; both interlocutors brought up against a brick wall, while the parrot tells himself in a low voice the unintelligible stories about his ribald past, with which he usually soothes his bed-time hour.

After a while the girl, who has been looking rather ruefully into the fire, says softly and apologetically—

"He wants me far more than you do."

"Do not add insult to injury."

"But it is true. You have done without me very comfortably—well, then, very uncomfortably, since you will have it so—for twenty-six years, and he has never done without me, and he never shall!"

At the last clause her voice sinks; but what it

loses in volume it gains in firmness, and her lover's temper rises.

"What senseless obstinacy!" is his not very lover-like inward comment; but he only says—

"Has it ever struck you that a brother may prove a broken reed to lean upon?"

"No."

"That he may turn the tables upon you?"

"I do not know what you mean."

"That he may marry."

For the first time a brand of real indignation kindles the depths of her eyes.

"That shows how little you know him! With his deep nature, after the terrible shipwreck he suffered ten years ago, when he was so disgracefully treated, he has never looked, never will look, at a woman again!"

"And you think that such shipwrecks are always final?"

"I do not know about the generality; I know that his is."

There is a quiet doggedness in her tone which shows him that further scepticism would be dangerous.

"So this is your last word?"

"It must be."

"You send me empty away?"

There is a Biblical turn in the phrase, and the depth of his reproach is conveyed by that drop of the voice which has once or twice from his pulpit sent a thrill, half religious, half sensuous, through her.

"I must."

"Do you realize what you are doing? Have you counted the cost?"

There is still that pulpit quality in his voice which confuses her between the priest and the lover; and the consciousness that his eyes are boring through her like fiery gimlets, as she has seen them do through his congregation when he has been driving the sword of some burning truth up to the hilt in them, makes her feel as if he were putting before her a final and irrevocable choice between eternal good and ill.

"It has never struck me that there was any to count," she answers, troubled.

"Do you understand what you are doing when you turn me out to-night, and send me back to my wretched apology for a home?"

"I fear you are very uncomfortable," she says, partly catching with relief at the chance of turning the conversation, but also in real housewifely solicitude for his welfare. "Why do not you change your lodgings?"

He waves away her matter-of-factness with a gesture of boundless impatience.

"Is it possible that you think I am challenging your pity for a few physical discomforts? If it were only that——"

He looks round contemptuously, but even as he does so a heave of æsthetic disgust agitates him at the memory of the down-at-heel slavey, the fire habitually let out, the oleograph of the Queen and Prince Albert, and the perennial smell of onions and paraffin to which he will have to carry back his broken heart. Unconscious of the ignoble track his thoughts have taken, she looks at him in silent dis-

tress, a distress so full of undisguised sympathy that he falls to urgent pleading.

"I know it is not the highest kind of nature that needs the heat of human sympathy before its fruits can ripen to any purpose; but such as it is, it is mine. Lettice, being what I am, how can I lift other hearts up when my own is trodden in the dust? How can I carry light and life to other souls when there is nothing but darkness and death in my own?"

The exaggeration of the phrase is patent; and something in it—she could hardly have told what—shocks her; yet her rebuke is lenient.

"If one has suffered one's self, one can surely help others better."

Her protest is lost in the whirlwind of his words—

"In after life you will have the satisfaction of saying to yourself, 'He had a career before him; he would have had a career if I had not murdered it.'"

She lifts her drooped head with dignity and spirit.

"I shall say nothing of the kind."

Once again through the blinding drift of his agitation he feels that he is on the wrong course, and is only damaging his cause.

"What am I saying?" he cries, clutching his handsome dark head with a gesture that, though theatrical, the dash of Irish blood which is in him makes perfectly natural. "You are getting further and further away from me. Put the right words into my mouth. There must be some that would move you if I could find them. Are there none—

none? Are you really, really going to send me away—send me away without a pang?”

Real feeling, coupled with the rhetorician's instinct, has put him on the right tack this time. The broken hoarseness of his usually tuneful voice, the alternate halt and rush of his words, bring an answering vibration into hers.

“Not quite without a pang.”

He can scarcely get out his rejoinder. “Then if this obstacle—this absurd”—once again he is on dangerous ground, but quickly recovers his footing—“if this obstacle that you think so insurmountable were removed, there would be nothing else between us?”

She fetches her breath quickly. “I do not say that. I do not know. I can't tell you. How can I when I can't tell myself.”

“If he marries——”

“What is the use of speculating on the impossible?”

Her voice is full of impatient, angry distress, and he can get nothing more out of her.

CHAPTER II

THE master of the house has been absent for a few days, and his return by an evening train entails the putting off dinner for half an hour. It is a respite for which Lettice Trent is truly thankful, but of which she feels the deplorable insufficiency. Half an hour in which to grow familiar with the fact of having seen the teacher at whose feet you have sat for twelve months rolling metaphorically and almost literally at yours! Her life has not been rich in acute sensations, and as she, with solitary flushings, goes over the details of the interview, her thoughts glide leniently over whatever of exaggeration, rhodomontade, and bad taste it may have called forth, to dwell with comparative complacency upon the size and brilliancy of the passion she has inspired. The idea is so new that she does not know what angle to look at it from. His sufferings, her own dense unsuspectingness; what will happen when next they meet?—she will have to see him no later than to-morrow, but that will be only in the pulpit—whether under different circumstances she could have answered differently? This last and weightiest question brings back some return of the quivering of flesh and spirit of half an hour ago; and she has asked it of herself a hundred different times, and answered it with a perpetual oscillation between yes and no.

The hundred and first query is cut in two by the sound of the hall-door bell, that tells of her brother's return. She hurries out to meet him—an immemorial custom—and they kiss each other with their usual sober pleasure in reunion. It strikes her indeed with a tweak of compunction that his greeting is rather more demonstrative—that he is a little gladder to see her than usual. He is far from suspecting the danger that has threatened him. Their affection is not an ebullient one, but to-night the consciousness of her half-treachery makes her add a small exotic caress.

“How cold your hand is!”

“Is it? I am not cold.”

He is gladder than usual to be at home again. What a happy tone in his voice! They reach the morning-room hearthrug, and the traveller spreads his palms towards the blaze, while the puppy humiliates herself—wrong way up—in uncalled-for boot-lickings at his feet.

“You have not said, ‘How do you do?’ to Kirstie.”

“How are you, Kirstie?”

His tone is kind, but absent. Usually he makes a fuss in his grave way with the little dog.

“Well, how is London?”

“London was very well when I left it.”

“As that was only two and a half hours ago, we may hope it is well still.”

“It was more than two and a half hours ago.”

She looks inquiringly at him.

“It was two days ago. I left London on Thursday.”

The surprise in her look amounts to a query, but

she does not put it into words, knowing that he is not fond of being questioned. She is rewarded.

"I was out of London; I was at Wimbledon."

"Wimbledon!"

"Yes, Wimbledon."

"I did not think that you knew any one at Wimbledon."

"Did not you?"

His speech, like his ideas, always moves slowly, and his sister is used to waiting for the tardy births of his brain. Nor is her curiosity so much excited as it would usually be, the pre-occupation with her own portentous piece of bottled news making other topics seem far and faint. Her brother, apparently not wishing to unfold himself further for the moment, turns the tables upon her, and his next remark makes her feel getting upon very dangerous ground.

"And you? What have you been up to?"

"Oh, not much. I bicycled down into the village to my carving-class after luncheon to-day. The roads were horrible. I all but skidded twice—and—Randal Chevening came to tea."

"And poetry-books?"

"No; no poetry-books; we—talked."

"Talk! Yes, that is about what he is good for."

The remark gives her a dreadful jar; and there is an uneasy and unwonted jocosity about the tone in which it is uttered that she does not recognize as belonging to the speaker. Surely there is something odd about Jim to-night! Can he suspect? Is that why he, usually the embodiment of large, slow calm, is fidgeting about the room so tiresomely? She finds no words in which to defend her

priestly lover, and it is the impugner of his merits who by-and-by comes back to the hearthrug and resumes the conversation.

"You have not asked me why I went to Wimbledon."

"I know that you do not like being asked why."

He certainly is odd. He has been thinking of Wimbledon the whole time, and has not known what he was saying upon the other subject!

"I have something to tell you."

"About Wimbledon?"

Her attention is fully aroused now, and her eyes follow, with that vague fear which the unaccustomed always gives us, his large fingers lifting up and setting down again the little Chelsea personages that stand on the narrow ledge of the Adams chimney-piece.

"I expect that it will surprise you."

"Yes?"

"But I hope that, on the whole, you will be pleased."

"*Pleased?*"

What can this be the preamble to? He comes to a dead stop, the line of his utterance evidently quite blocked by the ponderousness of the unaccustomed freight he is trying to send along it. How terribly slow he is! It is a thought that, as a rule, his sister never permits herself; but to-night it thrusts itself inevitably upon her.

"Well?"

Instead of a straightforward answer, he begins to try back laboriously on his own trail.

"I do not know whether you have noticed that I

have been to London—you have always thought it was London—oftener than usual of late?”

“I do not think I have.”

What can this be the preamble to?

“I have been for years meeting at the club off and on a man who used to be in my regiment. He left long before I joined, but he had been in it.”

“Yes?”

“He lives at Wimbledon now.”

“Does he?”

Mr. Trent clears his throat, and stops once more. So far they have only got back to their point of departure.

“He was always inviting me to go down there to golf with him.”

“And you went?”

What heaviness is this that has come to sit upon her chest?

“No, I did not, though I should have liked to try the links; but I did not think it good enough.”

There is an almost awed incredulity in his voice as to a state of mind so past as to be now unbelievable.

“So you refused?”

“Yes, I refused times out of mind; and then one day I did not refuse, I accepted.”

“Yes?”

“I went to Wimbledon.”

“Yes?”

“And then I went again.”

“Yes?”

“And again.”

“Yes?”

“And again.”

"Yes?"

A pause.

"Has your friend a wife?"

"No; he is a widower."

"Children?"

"Any amount."

"Grown up?"

"Three."

She knows what is coming now; but for the moment she cannot and will not let it come. She snatches at the first question that occurs to her, to stave it off for even a few seconds.

"What is the name of—of the family?"

"Kergouet."

"*Kergouet?*"

"Yes; it is an odd name. They came originally from Brittany."

"*Kergouet!*"

"It does not sound English, but they are."

"*Kergouet!*"

Her repetition of the word disconcerts him in the highest degree.

"You—you will get used to the sound."

Once again she repeats it, regardless of his uneasiness.

"Kergouet! I have heard the name before. One cannot mistake it. It is not—it cannot be——"

She breaks off; but he does not ask her to finish her sentence.

"There was a man of that name—it was before I was born, but I have heard of it, a scandalous case—a man in your regiment who ran away with—not the wife, but the—the mistress of a brother officer, and had to leave the army! It was said that there

were peculiarly disgraceful circumstances. It can't be that he was in any way related to—to—— ”

Such a look as hers must drag a negative out of him, one would think; but none comes. His large, good, stupid face is set like a flint; and in his usually unimportant eyes, small and palish, there is a depth of obstinacy too profound for his sister to plumb.

“ It is the same man; but you had better not say anything more against him, as I am going to marry his second daughter.”

Miss Trent has never known what faintness means, and now she catches for support neither at table nor chair-back, nor does the room go round with her; she only says very distinctly—

“ The daughter of a—— ”

“ He married her, and there never was a breath of scandal about her afterwards. She made him an excellent wife, and she is dead.”

“ I am not going to say anything against any of them.”

She sits down. Is it conceivable that she is really hearing what seems to have entered her ears? that the unsavoury story, which has been an unheeded possession of her memory for years, relegated with indifferent disgust to its remotest corner, should now be dragged forth into its very front, and *apropos* of what? Her brain refuses to open its doors to admit such a monstrosity; and for some moments she sits absolutely knocked out of time by it.

His voice, full of a distress which he tries to hinder from being anger too, reaches her in bold pleading.

“ If you could only see Marie.”

" Her name is Marie? "

" Yes."

" After? "

He sees and resents the drift of the question.

" I do not know after whom."

" How old is she? "

" Nineteen."

" And you are thirty-eight."

She regrets the useless dig as soon as it is delivered, and sees how he smarts under it.

" You can't regret the discrepancy more than I do."

Another halt for breath and realization, her eyes resting first on one, then on the other of her late parents' chairs, sacredly kept since the hour of their deaths to the identical spots occupied by them.

" Thank God they are dead! How could they have borne it? " The reflection drives her shipwrecked vessel upon the rock of an unwise question.

" Is it quite—*quite* settled? "

" Absolutely. I asked her to marry me yesterday evening."

" And she accepted you? "

" At once."

Another interval. The sister's eyes have moved to the brother's face, and are resting there in an unconscious openness of appraisal. Love in her case is not blind, if indeed he ever is, and does not merely put on the semblance of it to trick the outside. She sees as clearly as could *le premier venu* the clumsiness of her brother's figure, the want of harmony in his large features, upon which her own are delicate improvements; the pompousness of manner which protects his deep shyness. Is it

conceivable that the young adventuress who has enmeshed him has had eyes to see the noble virtues hiding beneath his unromantic exterior—the high honour, the truth, the single-mindedness? Is not it rather certain that she has cared nothing at all for them, but has had her greedy eyes fixed wholly upon his money and position? has looked upon him as the ladder by which the whole disreputable rout are to climb out of their mud?

Thoughts of this kind cannot but leave a print upon the face behind which they are being hatched, and that they have done so upon hers is evident by the acute surface disturbance that has spread over her brother's features, though it cannot affect the dogged bliss in his eyes. With a heave of the chest and a convulsive swallowing, the girl pulls herself together. It is going to be, and she must accept it.

"Is she pretty?"

"Wait till you see her."

At the conciliatory-sounding question his joy has bloomed out as broad and flaring as a Byblumen tulip in a May noon. *See her!* Yes, that is what will have to come next. She disguises the inevitable shudder under a quick change of position. He must not see the evidences of her disgust, or they will rob her of the miserable little part in him that may yet be left her.

"And clever? Amusing?"

"I dare say she is not what you would call clever, not highly educated, but quick—quick as lightning!"

An odious hope, of which she is heartily ashamed, darts up in Lettice's heart. The lively American

who had jilted Mr. Trent ten years ago had been "quick" too—"quick as lightning;" and it was his perfect inability to keep up with her speed that had motived her relinquishment of him and his Georgian house, warmly as she had admired the Adams ceilings and chimneypieces of the latter on her solitary visit to it. *Quick as lightning!* The brother's mind is usually tardy in following the windings of another, but on this occasion love has set a sharper edge on his wits, and he reads Lettice's thought.

"Yes, but she can put up with slow people."

Her silent acceptance—is it acceptance?—of this makes him move restlessly, and in so doing tread upon the still grovelling Kirstie's tail. Her protesting squeak, so much in excess of what the inflicted injury merits, seems to them both a blessed distraction. By the time that she is calmed, explained to, and set right way up, the air, to the man at least, seems sensibly lighter.

"Of course, you are taken aback at first."

"Yes"—very slowly—"I am taken aback."

"But when you get used to it—when you get to know her——"

"Yes?"

She cannot aid him in his efforts to hatch out the addled egg of his bald consolation.

"You will see that, so far from having lost anything, you have gained——"

"Oh, do not say it!" she cries, with an even acuter, and certainly better grounded, outburst of pain than Kirstie's.

"I know what you are going to say, that I shall

have gained a sister, but do not. It is—it is—so banal! Everybody says it, and it—it is not true.”

He looks at her in a dismay as flat as his untrue truism had been.

“I do not know what you mean. I will go and dress for dinner.”

He moves, not without dignity, doorwards; but in a second she has sprung after him, realizing the weightiness of the issue at stake—that those unsympathetic words *now* will for ever close the doors of that heart, which for all her twenty-two years have stood wide open to her. She must keep them from banging to, even if the finger she puts into the chink to stop them gets crushed to pieces in the process.

“Do not go! I want to hear a great deal more! It is so sudden! I thought I had you all to myself, as I have had for the last ten years.”

He pauses, very placable, though the allusion to the date of his former fiasco, upon which for years they have both been strictly silent, brings a small crease into his forehead.

“Ten years ago I made a great mistake; you think that I am now going to make another. Well, *I am not!*”

There is such a cocksure certainty of conviction in his tone that she must needs catch an echo of it.

“I believe you,” she says faintly. Then, with much more emphasis and life, “And oh, you dear fellow, I do hope you are going to be luckier this time!”

The aspiration lacks nothing in tender heat and sincerity, though the recurring allusion to the American disaster is, perhaps, not quite happy. But

Mr. Trent, with that largeness of treatment and overlooking of minutiae which makes intercourse with men as a rule easier than that with women, accepts only what is agreeable in the phrase, and says gratefully—

“Thank you, dear; please God, I shall.”

With an unaccustomed caress she lays her cheek against his sleeve.

“I had no business to count upon keeping you always to myself.”

“I was so likely to keep you always, was not I?”

“You were not *likely*, you were *certain*. No later than to-day I sent away some one because I thought you could not do without me!”

The bitterness of that misconception breeds a sigh that refuses to be quite strangled. For a moment he is startled out of his ecstatic preoccupation.

“To-day?”

“Yes, this afternoon.”

“This afternoon? Whom?”

“Randal Chevening.”

The brother breaks into a laugh of indignant amusement.

“He asked you to marry him?”

“Yes.”

“To go and live with him over the cheese-monger’s?”

“If you like to put it so.”

“Impudent young dog! He would have been better employed in the night-school, where Taylor tells me he never sets foot, than making an ass of himself about people who are meat for his masters!”

She turns away, dyed angry scarlet from head to

heel. In Jim's unaccustomed hand ridicule becomes a bludgeon. Her gesture is so unmistakable that Mr. Trent's tone changes to one of alarmed affection.

"You do not mean to say that you care about him? that you wish to go and live over the cheesemonger's?"

She bursts into tears at this persistent setting of her idyll in a contemptible light. Alone she might have withstood it, but complicated by the dreadful surprise the evening has brought her, it quite over-sets her.

"At least I am wanted *there!*"

CHAPTER III

HER tears were a dreadful mistake, but they were not an irreparable one. Her brother, always slow to take offence, least of all to-night desires or can afford to resent them. If he did, to whom could he pour out the narrative of his victory? Before the evening is half over she has heard twice repeated, with slow iteration of ecstasy—the difficult out-bubbling of confidence of a constitutionally tonguetied man—the tale of the steps by which he has climbed to his pinnacle.

Apparently there were only three of them in all—the day when Kergouet *père* had said, "Let me introduce you to my daughter;" the day on which she had allowed him the high privilege of tearing a ripped braid off the bottom of her skirt, and had shown no disapproval when he put it in his pocket; and the day—the narrator's voice grows low as of one entering a temple when he reaches it—on which, apparently at the first hint of priest and altar (this is a gloss of the hearer's), she had fallen into his arms.

The sister listens with a smile of whose glassy fixedness she is helplessly conscious, without being able to change it, and a running inward commentary which picks up ominous hints as it flows along underground. She must be a slattern, or the braid

would not have been hanging from her gown; a coquette of a very contemptible type, or she would not have allowed such an incident to become the medium of an amatory demonstration; and totally without dignity or delicacy, or she would not have tumbled into his mouth at the third meeting, like an over-ripe plum.

Happily unaware of the exegesis of his text that is going on at his side, Mr. Trent finishes his story, and falls into a blissful introspection, which is obviously marred only by the consciousness of his own lameness in expressing his stupefaction of joy and wonder. In the effort to remedy it he begins again, but only to give up in despair the struggle with his own congestion of words.

"It is no use trying to describe her!"

"Does she—does she like the same kind of things that you do? Has she the same sort of tastes?"

"If she has not, she will soon acquire them; and if she does not, it will not matter."

Perhaps he divines a snare set in the question, for there is something bulldog-like in the tenacity of grip upon his treasure that his words imply.

"She is fond of the country?"

"Yes, very fond; at least, I am sure she is. She has not had much opportunity of trying it as yet."

"They have always lived in the sub—at Wimbledon?"

"No-o. They have had no fixed home. They have been about the world a great deal."

Before Lettice's mental eye process in ragged row the names of the Continental resorts of the shady English, and she wisely seeks no further to

localize her future sister-in-law. A polite generality is her next venture.

"Living abroad gives people pleasant manners—plenty of *aplomb*. I dare say that she will not be nearly so shy of me as I shall be of her."

"She is not in the least shy."

"Her mother's daughter is scarcely likely to be!" This is the sister's inward comment. Aloud she says—

"Happy creature!"

"Not forward, either—not at all forward."

He smiles at some blissful recollection, and Lettice looks away. Her next question requires the preface of a determined swallowing-down of some choking repulsion.

"Is it to be soon?"

"Very soon. What is there to wait for?"

What, indeed? A foolish line from a super-annuated song runs through the girl's head—

"Wait till the clouds roll by!"

In this case she would have to wait some time—wait till the clouds roll away from the Kergouet family; till the father is reinstated in the army he has disgraced, and the dishonoured mother's memory whitewashed! Yes, there is certainly nothing to wait for. The wedding might as well be to-morrow.

"Wait till the clouds roll by."

They seem to have gathered very thick upon Miss Trent's head, as, on the following morning, after a less sleepful night than she had ever passed since her mother's last illness, she follows her brother to church by the short cut through the park, which is over-narrow to hold two abreast. For how many

years has she seen his broad back solidly plodding on in front of her on their weekly course! It is impossible to realize, though she bends mind and imagination to the effort from hall door to church porch, that henceforth another figure than hers will be treading in her brother's steps—a figure such as it is yet not difficult to construct, given the facts of its heredity. She interrupts the walk to church of her future relative to question whether she will ever go to church at all, but pulls herself up, shocked at her own want of Christian charity; and through the thick gloom of her forebodings the one ray of light which illumines the situation, broadens and brightens into a tremulous glow, as the solitary church bell calls her ever nearer and louder from the pretty mediæval tower, which seems trying to wrap itself in its ivy cloak from contact with the bastardized, red brick eighteenth-century body.

Her emancipation has come as a bitter surprise, but it has come. She is free, free to follow where a passionate summoning voice last night called her—a voice that seemed so certain of a fellow voice answering it from her own deeps, as to confuse her with leaping suspicion that it may be so! Within a very few minutes she will have to hear that voice again, decorously levelled, it is true, to his beautiful, if rather dramatic, rendering of the Liturgy; but still the very same voice that had told her from the Manor hearthrug that he was no ascetic. Thank Heaven, she will be spared the ordeal of hearing him preach, since the vicar holds to his own pulpit in the morning, though resignedly conscious of an eclipse to which the comparatively empty morning sittings bear irrefutable witness.

But Miss Trent has reckoned without the relative's death-bed, to which the Rev. John Taylor has been suddenly summoned, leaving the whole weight of the services upon his curate's shoulders. Dismay has seized her from the moment of her noting the vicar's absence from the entering procession of choir and clergy, a dismay which goes on steadily heightening till it reaches its climax, when she becomes aware that Randal Chevening is in the pulpit, rising so awkwardly close above the front pew, where—penalty of local importance—she and her brother sit. She had never before found its nearness oppressive, but had rather rejoiced in the opportunities given of watching each eager thought, each strong plea, dawn on the mobile features before being conveyed to the eloquent tongue of the preacher. To-day her eyes are glued to the ledge of prayer-books in front of her; yet she snatches one snap-shot glance. It tells her that he is very pale—that, perhaps, was to be expected—and that his features look sharper and better chiselled than ever from the impress they wear of severe mental suffering.

He looks an embodiment of fire and fasting. That the latter word but too probably expresses a literal fact occurs regretfully to the housewifely mind of Miss Trent, since, from what she knows of it, his landlady's cuisine is but little likely to tempt a love-sick appetite. From the Isle of Paphos, who is there that does not know that onions and sardines have for ever been excluded?

She listens with an unaccountable apprehension for the text, and is relieved when it comes, for

surely it can have no reference to her and him—"Thou shalt do no murder."

He gives it out in a lifeless voice, and his opening sentences are pitched in a low, flat key, which matches the commonplaces it conveys—commonplaces suggested by the original fratricide. The vicar himself could scarcely have been triter. But it is not for more than a few minutes that he crawls along the level. With a bound the dry theme has sprung into life; it is throwing out branches and tributaries on every side. It is burgeoning into a hundred flowers of illustration. Cain is dismissed after being cursorily used to demonstrate how immensely his descendants have improved upon the methods of the clumsy original artificer with the bludgeon.

In a voice that has regained its clear volume, the young prophet thundering above Lettice's head announces to the thin morning congregation, which has not been thickened by any rumour of the vicar's absence, that there are probably not many among them who, if they have reached man- or womanhood, have not been to some extent guilty of the worst form of fratricide—the murder of a brother's soul. With a rush of strong phrases, a torrent of what would be rhetoric if it were not so coloured by potent feeling as to be beyond and above the windy wordiness which the word often implies, he enumerates the different weapons with which we do our killing—the butcher's knife of overt unkindness; the strychnine and prussic-acid of unclean or evil suggestion; the starvation of withheld sympathy.

At the last clause he stops dramatically, and after

a pause which bathes the occupant of a front pew in cold perspiration, goes on in a quiet, sad voice, that though low is thrillingly audible through the church, to paint a picture which, though too florid in its details to satisfy the claims of perfect good taste, has yet a moving quality of its own—of the empty cup held up in the trembling hand of our wayside brother, to be filled with the cool spring water of a little love, a little pity, a little understanding. We dash it aside—the preacher makes a theatrical gesture as of flinging something from him—or we pass it by ignoringly. The crime in either case is equal. There is not a pin to pick between them! We pass by, and go about our work—very possibly good work, or our play—innocent play enough in all likelihood—and end our days with prayer for our own spiritual welfare, that may be both devout and sincere; but nevertheless we are homicides!

His voice falls plumb down, and is extinguished in a dramatic silence; then rises again, perfectly distinct, yet with a muffled sound of woe in it.

The souls that we have slain outright, or wounded to the death, may be poor stunted things, with few potentialities of growth or expansion, or they may—each word falls with slow, sad weight—have contained the seeds of infinite soaring development; but for us might have raised themselves into giant trees, whose leaves would have been for the healing of the nations, and under whose beneficent shadow peoples yet unborn might have found rest and refreshment.

Again he pauses, and passes his hand across his forehead, as if to wipe away the pain that inward

vision has stamped there; and Lettice makes a slight movement as of relief.

The worst must be over now. If he were only not so dreadfully near. Even a few paces further off her judgment would have come to her aid, would have condemned the floridness of his rhetoric, and the badness of his taste; but here, immediately below him, with the consciousness of his pallid eager face right above her ostrich feathers, with the sword of his trenchant, yet deeply emotional, voice cutting through her very vitals, she is capable of nothing but a crushing sense of the enormity of the wrong she has done him. All the same, it is cruel to pillory her thus publicly.

Forgetting in the painful confusion of her ideas that the congregation is not behind the scenes of last night's catastrophe, she has a suffocated sense that each member of it must be making the application; and from under her eyelids steals a horrified glance round to verify this apprehension. The lady whom nobody visits is sitting with her head bent and hands tightly folded, as if in the corner of memory she were disinterring the bones of some victim such as the preacher has described. On the other hand, the three old gentlewomen, who for longer than Lettice can remember have flourished in narrow gentility in three several village households, have their bonnets perkily lifted with a puzzled air of titillation, coupled with a perfect innocence of having ever had the chance of murdering anything.

But Jim? Surely after her confidence to him last night—a confidence of which she has never repented but once, and that has been ever since—with him, at least, there can be no mistake as to the

drift of the curate's tirade. Slow to wrath as he is, it cannot fail but move him to the deepest resentment. She scarcely dares carry her glance up to his face. But it does not take a second to prove to her how very unfounded her fears are. He is leaning back in his corner with his arms folded, the slightest hint of a beatific smile touching the corners of his mouth, evidently perfectly unaware of the lurid bolts flying round his head, or the smell of sulphur in the air.

Never did Benediction dismiss a worshipper more thankful to be set free than the one who, with a sensation of having been undergoing the process of flaying for the last half-hour, walks homeward to the church gate, mechanically returning the salutations she receives, but, contrary to her usual friendly habit, not stopping to speak to any one. She is glad that a tenant with a grievance button-holes her brother on the way out, and so leaves her a few moments for collection and recovery. At first there is such a singing in her head, and such a confusion of excitement and pain, that she can only walk blindly on, with no definite thoughts; but as the brush of the sharp autumn air on her face, and the withdrawal of that thundering proximity, gradually restore her to the possession of her senses, a feeling of hot indignation begins to supersede her original remorse. It was an unworthy vengeance—unworthy, most unworthy of him.

She pauses in her quick walk, looking apprehensively back to see whether Jim is likely to overtake her before she has got her ruffled countenance back to seemly Sunday serenity. Instead of the

expected figure, she sees that of the object of her ireful reflections hastening as fast as his long, black, clerical legs will carry him in her track. It has been a weekly habit for him to lunch with them on Sunday; but it has never occurred to her that the custom would not be intermitted to-day. Is it possible that he is capable of the bad taste of forcing himself upon her after the morning's outrage? She stands and awaits him with outwardly quiet dignity, both hands remaining in the muff that the first sting of coming winter has made grateful.

"I followed you to say that I am afraid I cannot lunch with you to-day."

She bends her head slightly in acquiescence; and, after an irresolute look at her, he turns on his heel, lifting his hat. It would be wiser to let him go, contenting herself with the silent rebuke of her attitude; but the unassumed wretchedness of his air raises in her the remorse only so lately and partially put to sleep. Perhaps she is indeed the homicide that he has publicly proclaimed her to be; for he looks half dead.

"You had no right to preach at me."

Is it wrath or relenting that unsteadies her voice? He wheels round and faces her again, but no sound of apology or denial crosses his lips.

"It was unworthy of you—most unworthy; it was worse, it was a disgrace to your office!"

Her whip-lash cuts. She can see the red weal it has raised across his white face; but he still takes his chastisement dumbly. A revulsion comes. How hideously he must have suffered before he could have descended to such a vengeance!

"You look as if you had not eaten anything for a week."

"I have not."

It shows a prosaic fibre; but the thought of Mrs. Barton's cuisine pleads her lodger's cause more eloquently than any defensive oratory on his part could have done with his present arraigner.

"Have you not slept either?"

"I did not go to bed last night."

"That was sensible."

There is a touch of the old friendliness in the chiding tone, which she perceives too late to extract it.

"I suppose that every one knows best how to treat their own diseases."

"I very much doubt it."

"And, moreover, I had to prepare—my—sermon." He seems to have some difficulty in uttering the words. "I did not know till last night that I should have to take the vicar's place."

"If I had known it I should have stayed at home."

Indignation is again getting the upper hand. It is effrontery in him thus to allude to the deliberate planning of his offence in the night watches. Once again the cut of her whip summons his blood to answer her.

"Do you suppose that any one but yourself made the application?"

"Whether they did or no, it was equally inexcusable to make the pulpit the vehicle for conveying your own private——"

She pauses, unable to suit herself with a word.

"It *was* inexcusable," he says in a hollow voice,

his head dropping on his chest, and with an abandonment of all self-defence which must knock the weapon out of any generous hand.

"What possessed you to do it?" she asks in a mournful, mollified key.

"It was wrung out of me by my agony," he answers, with his head still abased on his breast. After a moment or two raising it, and with an effort at recovered self-respect, "And yet my message was a true one. If there had been no *you* in the case I should still have felt bound to deliver it. I have always been overwhelmed by the sense of the power of human souls over each other. If we realized our capacity for harm in that way we should never dare open our lips without an inward prayer that we might not be doing some deadly injury to our neighbour by our idle breath."

"I think that is an overstrained way of looking at it," she says, but her voice trembles, the old confusion between lover and apostle beginning to blur her vision.

"Is it? It is *my* way."

He lifts his head again, and his fine face, intellectual yet sensuous, looks at her with something of its customary superiority won back. The marks of suffering upon it are so legible to the most cursory glancer that there is more of ruth than wrath in her next words.

"I used to look forward to your sermons from Sunday to Sunday, and now I shall have to give up attending evening service."

"You need not," he answers in a stifled voice—"at least, not for long."

"Do you mean to say that you are going?" she

cries, in an accent of such real distress as brings a slight wash of colour over the marble of his face—"that I have driven you away? Oh, how I reproach myself!"

"You need not," he answers in a tone that with so indulgent a listener may pass for magnanimous. "I shall not be missed. Such gifts as I have are not of the kind that are needed here"—he looks round with an eye of lenient disparagement, but whether of himself or of the distant school-house and cottage roofs is uncertain—"and however little you realize—happily for yourself you are not imaginative—what you have done, you must see that it is impossible I could remain here."

Her eyes drop to the gravel path, and an indisputable sigh heaves the tails of her little sable boa.

"If I am to be ever fit for work again, I must go away—go away from the one creature in the world who completes my being, as I complete hers, because she has allowed a miserable molehill of an obstacle to rise into an Alp between us."

His eyes are full of upbraiding, and the ill-covered fire of last night's passion is breaking out through the ventages of eye and mouth and quivering nostril. The apostle who all along has had some difficulty in keeping his head above water is entirely submerged in the lover.

Lettice stands in downcast distress that has yet an element of acrid enjoyment. Half subjugated by the contagion of his hot urgency, half taken off her feet by the gust of his importunate asking, she stands in vibrating uncertainty. When she left home this morning she had fully intended to tell him that the obstacle between them was removed,

but now that the moment for that admission is come, something hinders its passage. Is this the real thing—the thing that comes but once in a lifetime? Is it? Is it? How is she to recognize it? By what birth-mark? The question keeps putting itself in ceaseless disquiet; but through all her being there is such a noisy whirl that she cannot distinguish the answer. Her look, wandering helplessly beyond her lover, alights on a solid figure stumbling along the path she has just trodden. She recognizes it with a sense of respite.

“Here is Jim!”

A balked look of temper and misery on Chevening's face answers the announcement.

“Does he know?”

The reply comes reluctantly. “Yes; I told him last night.”

“Was he very much upset?”

The state of mind presupposed in the question is in such glaring contrast with fact that Miss Trent smiles rather convulsively.

“I—I do not think he quite took it in.”

CHAPTER IV

"We missed the vicar," says Mr. Trent at luncheon. "I hope he will be back by next Sunday."

His sister glances at him apprehensively. With all his air of detachment during the sermon, is it possible that he had listened and understood? He goes on placidly eating and commenting.

"Randal did not give us a very favourable specimen of his powers this morning, did he? But, of course, he had to get it up in a hurry, and under the circumstances one ought not to be hard upon him."

Again she looks at him in nervous doubt. To which set of circumstances does he allude—the sudden call upon the curate's oratory or the state of his affections? A slight smile determines the point, and makes the listener feel an indignation which the presence of the servants in the room compels her to bottle, and thereby intensify. They are no sooner gone than her ire finds vent in words.

"I should have thought that at this moment you were the last person who had a right to laugh at him."

He looks up, grave at once. "Are our cases quite parallel ones? I *can* keep a wife."

"So can he, perhaps, if he chooses one who does not care about much *keeping*."

The words frighten her as soon as they are ut-

tered. Do not they seem to reflect by contrast on her brother's choice? But, with his usual wise slowness to notice missiles, whether brickbats or pellets, which, if aimed at, do not hit him, he passes her retort by. No offence for himself tinges the affectionate fear for her written all over his broad face.

"You do not look as if you were joking; but you *cannot* be serious!"

"Cannot I?"

Her answer so deepens the alarm in his look that she perversely expands her theme.

"Though I have been luxuriously brought up, I am not naturally luxurious. I could live decently upon a small income with a person I——"

"Loved," she was going to say, but the verb refuses to produce itself.

"With a person you——"

"With a person I—I got on well with."

The excessive baldness of her climax relaxes the tension of his face into a slight smile.

"If you have no better reason than that to give for leaving me——"

"Have not you filled my place?"

He glances round the large room with an expression of perturbed surprise ruffling his deep placidity.

"Is not there room enough for you both?"

She has often felt tried by her brother's limitations. His present inability to see the gigantic object that blocks her own vision lands her in helpless silence.

"If I had ten wives it would make no difference. This is your home until you marry."

"I shall never——"

The formula has sprung mechanically to her lips for so long that now it has nearly reappeared before she remembers that it has lost all its meaning.

"Well, then, till you die."

She knows it is not true; yet this evidence of how little she is ousted from his strong heart soothes her soreness.

"Have you broken it to Miss Kergouet?"

"There was no question of breaking. You 'break' only bad news."

"How did she take it? What did she say?"

He leans back his head, and looks up as one who would rapturously recover an utterance issued from the skies.

"She said, 'The more the merrier!'"

Miss Trent shudders. *The more the merrier!* That means that henceforth she herself is to be only one of the Comus rout that are rushing with lewd pipes and cymbals to invade the immemorial quiet of her home! But for the outrage of the morning's sermon, what a holy, happy spot the lodging over the cheesemonger's would now appear! As it is, wherever she looks abroad there is nothing but blackness.

While the days go on relentlessly towards her doom, the Comus rout looms larger and the pulpit insult less. She has abstained from evening church on the fateful Sunday, and avoided the village and the haunts most frequented by Chevening on the following day. Her pains are apparently superfluous, since he makes no effort to see, nor does he write, to her.

By Saturday the agitation of her own mind and the consciousness of her foreboding as to the state of his are more than she can bear, and on the afternoon of that day she drives her little pony-cart through the brooding vapour and copper and orange glories of the park to the Vicarage, hoping to combine the gaining some news of the object of her misgiving with the necessary visit of condolence on the death of the vicar's mother. She meets the vicar himself, as she turn in at the gate, and he escorts her into the house, apologizing as he does so for his wife's absence.

"She has a headache—one of her worst."

He says it with a melancholy pride. Each of us has his or her pet glory, and Mr. Taylor, though the meekest of men and lowliest of Christians, finds his in the unsurpassable ferocity of his wife's sick-headaches.

"I am so sorry! I only came in just to say how much I sympathize—how grieved I was to hear of your loss."

"Thank you."

"I scarcely expected that you would be back yet."

He sighs patiently. "It would certainly have been more convenient to me to prolong my absence over to-morrow, as I had, of course, a good deal of business to transact in connection with my dear mother's affairs; but I had a letter from Chevening, written evidently in such a state of mental distress, and representing his need for immediate change as so urgent that I thought it best to return."

This explanation, though given without any

parade of complaint, reduces the condoling visitor to a wide-eyed silence. Shock at the utter selfishness of her lover's action has time to subside, or perhaps rather to deepen into dread misgiving as to the condition of a mind which can so forget the charities, and even humanities of life before she asks without flagrant faltering—

“Is he gone?”

“He went this morning. At the last moment he seemed reluctant, and offered to take all the services for me to-morrow, but I insisted on his getting away at once. To tell you the truth, I thought he was on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown!”

The good man's eyes are fixed upon Miss Trent, as eyes naturally rest on an object immediately before them, but to her guilty consciousness there is meaning and condemnation in their gaze.

“Indeed? It is rather hard upon you—just now, too.”

“Oh, I dare say work is the best thing for me; and he would not have been any help to me in his present state.”

The visitor receives this last unintended arrow full in her breast, and its sting makes her tighten her lips and throw her eyes on the Art Kidder that carpets the Vicarage drawing-room.

“He has never been quite in his element here,” pursues the vicar, with a rather distressed wrinkle on his forehead. “He has always felt himself thrown away. With his gift——”

Mr. Taylor pauses in surprise at the slight contortion which, at the mention of his curate's endowment, passes over his guest's features; but,

thinking he must have been mistaken, presently goes on—

“The way in which he has filled the church is nothing less than phenomenal !”

There is a slightly rueful, if quite unenvious accent in the utterance of this tribute; yet he manfully adds to it—

“The number of communicants, too, is greatly increased.”

Lettice lifts her head, the reverent pride in her priestly conquest, which had been her normal feeling, beginning to revive.

“And yet he thinks that he has little effect or influence in the parish !”

The tone expresses admiring incredulity, and the vicar is but human.

“It is chiefly strangers—the people who come out of Stanway and Bradling to hear him”—naming two adjacent manufacturing towns—“who are most impressed by him; but”—conscious of, and instantly repentant for something unhandsome in the turn of the phrase—“it is undoubtedly a great gift, a very valuable gift.”

Before Miss Trent leaves the Vicarage she has ascertained that the knowledge of her brother's engagement, and the consequent entire change of her own outlook on life, had not reached the curate before his departure. She does not know whether she is relieved or disappointed; relieved at not having at once to find new defensive weapons against him, the old ones having snapped in two, or disappointed at being no longer liable to the shock of that assault which had given her the most

pungent sensations, whether of pleasure or pain, that fate has yet afforded her.

Life would be very flat without him, if it were not for that other subject of absorbing interest, which makes it so much worse than flat. Yet even with Miss Kergouet and her own soon-to-be-desecrated home for rivals, Mr. Chevening does not take a back seat in his lady's mind. There are few of her waking, and not many of her sleeping, dreams from which he is wholly absent.

Life with him would not be a bed of roses—poor, irritable, high-strung. Her bark would have no summer sea to sail on in his company. But what noble and elevating excitement there would be in breasting the storms and topping the waves together! And how he loves her! To him, at all events, she is indispensable; there can be no mistake in this case as there was in that of her brother. He cannot do without her. Wonderful and awe-inspiring as is the fact, it is yet true that health and brain-power are failing him under the mere terror of not winning her. Deprived of her, he is a wreck. With her at his side, to what heights may he not soar! Her feelings do not always keep at this lofty level; but even at their lowest, the cheesemonger's lodgings grow more and more to be regarded by her in the light of a desirable and even fragrant refuge. How much of this is due to the increasing bitterness that pinches her heart, as her span of possession of her old home rapidly dwindles, she does not ask herself.

Wandering through the familiar rooms, pacing along the hallowed and haunted garden paths, she

torments herself by trying to forecast with what monstrosities of bad taste and ill-breeding they will be disfigured. It is seldom that she can bring herself to frame a question as to the tastes or habits of the family into which she is so soon to be brought into such close relationship; but whenever she does so, the answer—very contrary to the utterer's intention—sends them down a peg lower in her estimation. Her brother's lessening communicativeness, though he always replies cheerfully and readily to her grudging queries, shows her that he is aware of this result.

"I hope that Miss Kergouet will not think this too shabby," she says one day, lifting her eyes to the fine old Chinese paper which covers the walls of the room in which they are sitting. "I suppose she is sure to insist on the house being entirely refurnished."

"And I am *sure* that she is *sure* not to *insist* upon anything," he answers, wisely laughing at what its owner is well aware is not a pleasantly turned phrase. "I dare say she will think a little clean paint will not do us any harm, and there is no denying that we do need some freshening up."

His sister continues ruefully to regard the tall tree-trunks and branches, the gay flowers and gayer birds, whose beauties no picture is allowed to obscure; and, driven by that impulse to say a more disagreeable thing because one has already said a disagreeable one, she remarks—

"Well, I hope she will see her way to sparing this!"

It is impossible to treat the observation as a joke; but the only indication Mr. Trent gives of

not having relished it is that he presently takes up a book, and the rest of the evening is passed in silence.

The full river of his blissful expansiveness has seemed nearly to wash away her heart; yet when it dwindles to a thin streamlet under the parching influence of her want of sympathy, she tries to set it flowing again. On the morning after the Chinese-paper episode she obligingly attempts an *amende*.

"You have never shown me Miss Kergouet's photograph. I suppose you have got one?"

"Yes."

He adds nothing to the monosyllable; yet, to his sister's ear, it plainly conveys that life in her absence would be impossible without such a stay.

"Will not you show it to me?"

He hesitates for a second. "If you do not mind, I think not. To a person who does not know her, no photograph gives an idea of her; the colour, the life, the sparkle——"

He breaks off, pulling himself up, as Lettice remorsefully divines, with a chilled recollection of her reception of former raptures. As her face falls, he adds with a rather uneasy kindliness—

"You will not have long to wait before you see the original."

"So she tells me."

His look bespeaks pleased surprise. "She has written to you."

"Yes; in answer to a letter of congratulation I sent her a week ago."

If he perceives that this careful noting of the date of her own communication implies reproach

at the tardiness of the rejoinder, he shows it only by an indulgent laugh.

"She is always a most reluctant scribe."

Miss Trent draws a letter from her pocket.

"Would you like to see it?"

"If you do not mind showing it to me."

She puts it into his hand, and watches him covertly while he reads it. To herself it had seemed a deplorable production—the handwriting half-educated, the phrasing slipshod and vulgar, and one sentence disgraced by a flagrant fault in spelling. She knows exactly the spot on the second page where that slip occurs, and expects, half in dread, half in malicious anticipation, the look of shame and annoyance that will surely cross his features when he reaches it.

But he has reached and passed it, with no sign of a cloud dimming his brilliant satisfaction, and it is with a distinct note of triumph that he gives the letter back.

"And she means every word she says!"

The idea that her upstart supplanter's expressions of pleasure in the prospect of their future relationship could possibly be insincere had never occurred to Lettice; and the suggestion ruffles her so much that she cannot resist shooting one shaft.

"I suppose that Miss Kergouet has been educated chiefly in France?"

"Yes; I believe that she speaks French quite as well as she does English."

"That would, no doubt, not be difficult," is the sister's inward comment; but her arrow having completely missed its mark, she prudently keeps the rest of her stock in her quiver for future use.

She has not, after all, much opportunity for employing them, as—partly, perhaps, to avoid them, but chiefly through the waxing strength of the enchantment that binds him—her brother is less and less at home.

And the little, dark days draw in and in, draw on and on, galloping murkily to the now inevitable goal. Lettice has not realized how much hope she has nourished of some thunderbolted God descending, some earth-splitting or flood rising to avert the catastrophe, until the small details of preparation bring home to her that neither God nor man has any intention of interposing. Her last flicker of hope dies out on that day when she sees her bridesmaid's dress laid out on the bed.

"It does not look much like you, 'm!" says the maid, hold-cheaply, picking up a scrap of the fabric between her finger and thumb. "Will you try it on at dressing-time to-night?"

"I will not try it on at all!" Then, noting a something too much of sympathy in her attendant's eye, she adds shortly, "There is no need. It is sure to be all right!"

Only a week now parts her from the imminent calamity.

"Marie wants you to go down a day earlier than you propose," her brother says that same evening.

"As the wedding is on the 15th, will not it be soon enough for me to arrive on the 14th?"

"If you do not mind, she wants you to come on the 13th."

"That we may have twenty-four hours in which to make acquaintance? Oh, certainly."

"It is not only that; she wants to have a sort of rehearsal of the ceremony in the church on the day before."

"A *rehearsal* in a *church*! That sounds rather
——"

"Theatrical," she is going to say; but recollecting in time that an allusion to the ostensible profession with which the bride's mother had coupled a less proclaimable one is scarcely judicious, she breaks off. It may be that his thought follows hers, for a correction of the phrase follows more briskly than is the wont of his slow speech.

"Rehearsal was not the right word. I ought not to have used it. She only wants just to practice the procession—you know, it is to be rather a big affair—so that there may be no hitch upon the 15th."

"I see."

CHAPTER V

THE 13th of December arrives, and the deposed sovereign leaves her home for the last time as its mistress. There has been nothing to break her fall—no previous dismantling, or even lesser alteration—since the master of the house has decided that all changes shall await the will of the new queen. The rooms through which Lettice walks, taking solemn good-bye, greet her with their familiar air of mellow gentleness, unsuspecting of the red ruin that awaits them.

"But for the 'rehearsal' I might have had one more day," she says to herself, an acrid tear stealing into either eye.

As she advances on her journey, and the well-known stations of the often-travelled railway-line rapidly succeed each other, her express hurling itself past them, her regrets yield somewhat to a rueful curiosity. What will her first impression be—worse than what imagination has bodied forth? To be worse would be scarcely possible; yet to be better is, in the highest degree, improbable. As so often before, but with even greater vividness of presentment, the personages of the drama into which she has been pitch-forked pass before her mind's eye—the terrible protagonist, with her "little-milliner" prettiness, and her heart-breaking "sparkle," probably desolatingly determined to be

sisterly; the blear-eyed old debauchee of a father; the elder brother, who is "something" in a bank—she has never demeaned herself to inquire what—he will probably end by robbing the till); the actress-sister, who needlessly veils her total obscurity on the stage by a *nom-de-théâtre*; and the background filled with a rabble of disorderly juveniles!

A journey to an unwelcome goal always seems brief; and Euston's platform and line of expectant porters surprise her by their too-soon appearing. The drive across London, though her horse is slow and lame, is also over too soon; and Victoria—the very ante-chamber to the place of torment—reached before she had thought it possible. Here, at all events, she has the distraction of an enforced change of idea. No lady's-maid who respects herself is ever known to arrive at a new place except genteelly labouring under a sick-headache; nor is Miss Trent's any exception to this golden rule. In humanely ministering to her sufferings, in propping her limp back with rugs, in arranging her with her face to the engine, and letting down the window of the railway-carriage to give her air, Lettice, for a few moments, forgets the abhorred goal at which that railway-carriage is to land her.

She is congratulating herself on having the compartment to herself and her invalid, when, the guard's whistle having already blown, and the train on the very edge of movement, a breathless porter, staggering under the load of countless parcels, small and great, flings open the door, and a young lady vaults in. The laden porter follows; and by the time that her packages are piled in the

netting and under and over the three available seats the train is in quickish motion, and Lettice catches her breath as the man jumps dangerously out.

The intruder gives a sigh of relief at her accomplished feat, clears her own seat of some "unconsidered trifles" that encumber it, and is about to settle down in her corner, when her eye falls on the open window. In a second she is across the carriage, and, with an airy "You don't mind?" begins to pull up the sash.

Lettice lays her hand decisively upon the top. "Excuse me, but this poor woman is ill. She must have air."

"*Air!* On the 13th of December?"

"It is milder than many days in April; and, in the case of a sick-headache——"

"Sick-headaches ought to have reserved carriages!" retorts the young lady, half-laughing, yet with undeniable rudeness. But she does not insist, and confines her protest to rolling herself up like a hedgehog in her wraps, and ostentatiously closing her own ventilator.

Lettice shoots a glance of wondering indignation at such discourtesy; and the wonder, if not the indignation, deepens as she realizes the extreme youth and attractiveness of the criminal. By her look she cannot have reached twenty years; and her prettiness is of that decided and excessive kind concerning which there can be no two opinions. A beauty she undoubtedly is; a lady, despite her behaviour, she may be, though not inevitably so. Her dress, in its gay inexpensiveness, hints of a doubtful fatherhood between France and Bohemia.

She meets Miss Trent's look with one of frank ill-humour and defiance, under which there yet seems to lurk an indication to laugh—of repentance or remorse not a trace.

No further verbal amenities pass during the half-hour which elapses before Wimbledon is reached; and at that station Miss Trent's attention is too entirely occupied in propping her flaccid maid and looking after her own luggage for her to lay much stress on the fact that her fellow-traveller is also getting out.

With the help of a porter, Lettice has hoisted the sufferer, who has given way with the completeness common to her class, into a fly, and is telling the address to the cabman—Acacia Lodge, St. Luke's Road—when she is aware of her adversary once more at her elbow. No sooner have the words left her lips, than, to her great surprise, she sees the latter coming up to her with outstretched hand and a radiant smile.

"You must be Lettice?"

The revelation—and yet why had not she guessed it all along?—is too sudden; and for a moment the offered fingers in their very time-worn Suède glove remain untaken, and Lettice stands, one solid block of ice. Then she bethinks herself, though the remembrance of the recent incivility and the shock of the present discovery are too potent to allow of her concocting much of a smile to accompany her stiff little sentence.

"And you are Miss Kergouet?"

The formality of the phrase, following upon the glibness with which her own Christian name has been pronounced, cannot be looked upon as

other than a snub; but the bride-elect, if she takes her revenge, takes it gaily.

"I am; but I shall not be for long."

She laughs; and for a moment they stand taking stock of each other.

"I cannot think why I did not guess it," says Miss Trent, in a chilly, low key, "for you are almost exactly what I expected."

Since the idea of her future sister-in-law has been derived wholly from the rhapsodies of a besotted lover, this might pass muster as a compliment; but it does not convey the impression of one.

"My photographs do not give much idea of me."

In the mouth of one less lovely the words might sound fatuous; but it would be so very difficult for Miss Kergouet to think herself prettier than she is, that in her it is only a plain statement of fact.

"My brother has never shown me your photograph."

The other gives a little shrug. "That was unlucky as it turns out!" Then, with a slight laugh that might mean to be propitiatory—"I dare say we shall go on better than we began. Jim ought to have told me how very fond of air you are."

The accusation is not a grave one, and yet there is something in the turn of the phrase that irritates inexpressibly her to whom it is addressed; the tone of rather fault-finding ownership in which she alludes to her *fiancé* not the least. Nothing can be stiffer than her rejoinder.

"It was a case of common humanity."

The implication that the quality alluded to has not been displayed by her interlocutor is so un-

mistakable that the latter can't avoid grasping it. She looks thoroughly surprised.

"Maids are always sick travelling," she rejoins with a large generality—"at least, so I am told, for I never had one of my own, and I always say what comes uppermost."

Miss Trent receives this announcement in freezing silence, and puts her foot on the step of her cab.

"I will not offer to join you," cries the other, jauntily signalling to a hansom; "there would not be room for my packages and yours"—with a smilingly malicious glance at the maid collapsed in a corner of the four-wheeler. "*À bientôt.*"

"She is much worse than I expected. I did not think it possible, but she is. And Jim expects me to live with her!"

This is the cheerful turn to which Lettice's reflections are set during her half-mile drive. One of her apprehensions has, at least, not been realized, that of the exaggerated sisterly tenderness which she has dreaded having to endure. She smiles wrathfully. It is for insolence and incivility, on the contrary, that she should have braced herself.

Her adversary receives her on the doorstep of a smallish commonplace villa, with apparently not the slightest remembrance of their past brush to mar the easy cheerfulness of her welcome.

"I am afraid you will find us rather topsy-turvy—that we always are—but more topsy-turvy than usual with the preparations for this auspicious event; but, as I dare say I shall only be married once in my life, I was determined to have a splash wedding; and if you have not got many servants, that gives you a good deal to do."

She is walking along as she talks, and the end of her sentence ushers the guest into a drawing-room, the first glimpse of whose matchless disorder takes her breath away. It seems to excite some slight surprise, even in its mistress's mind.

"Those wretched children have been bear-fighting again," she says in an explanatory key; "but I suppose I must not be very much down upon them, they are all so above themselves they scarcely know what they are doing."

"Above themselves?"

"Yes, at being all together again; the four young ones only arrived from Paris on Saturday. Louis is at a *lycée* there, and the others have been staying at a pension, kept by a relative of dear mother's, for lessons."

Miss Trent gives a stifled gasp; but it is not audibly that she puts the question—

"Lessons in what?"

A few minutes later, to escape the suffocation of constraint to hide what she is undergoing, Lettice suggests being shown to her room, on the pretext of having her own unpacking to do; but her companion does not encourage the idea.

"I assure you there is no hurry. Heaven knows when we shall dine to-night, or"—laughing—"whether we shall have any dinner at all."

A moment later, as the other makes no comment upon this encouraging statement, she adds—

"No doubt Jim has told you that we do not keep very regular hours."

"No, I can't say that my brother mentioned it."

"He does not seem to have been very communicative—'poor old Jim!'—but he had always rather

let somebody else do the talking for him, would not he?"

Miss Trent shudders. "Jim" is bad enough, difficult enough to hear without an irrational madness of protest, but "poor old Jim!"

"He tried to reform us at first; but, on the contrary, we are on the high-road towards reforming *him*. If any one is hungry or gets tired of waiting, there is always a bit of cold beef, or a *pâté*, or something on the sideboard, and he can go in and help himself."

It is all said without a trace of apology in the words or the light high voice; but one glint from the sparkling dark eyes—in sparkle as in everything else Lettice's future relative far exceeds her worst forebodings—makes the latter ask herself whether there may not be a malicious intentional over-colouring in the awful map of Bohemia thus unrolled before her eyes.

She answers in the same spirit, "What a capital plan!"

"I dare say we shall not sit down much before nine. Father can't be back till late, nor Gabriel, either."

"*Gabriel!*"

"Yes, Gabriel. Has not Jim mentioned *him*, either?"

There is a faint echo of resentment in the non-chalance of her voice.

"No, I can't say that he has."

"H'm! Well, Gabriel is my eldest brother, and the pick of the basket."

She says it defiantly, and there is challenge in her eye.

Miss Trent does not take up the gage. A horrible speculation as to whether the pick of the basket will feel himself entitled to make free with her Christian name and how she shall stop him paralyzing utterance.

"You will be all together for the last time," she says presently, forcing utterance and a friendly smile.

The other lifts her beautifully drawn eyebrows.

"For the last time here, perhaps." And her future sister-in-law takes in with a sinking heart the not obscure implication.

Miss Kergouet goes on. "And, of course, Esmeralda can't get back to dinner."

"Esme——"

"Esmeralda, my eldest sister. Do you mean to say that Jim has never mentioned *her*? Well, I must say that he does not seem to have been very forthcoming about his future relatives!"

She ends with a laugh that, though pretty and rippling, is not quite good-humoured.

"He has spoken of her several times," rejoins Lettice, with a guilty consciousness of how often her own ungovernable distaste to the topic has dammed the current of her brother's confidences; "but I am afraid I had forgotten that her name was——"

"Esmeralda. She was named after dear mother. Her theatrical name—perhaps you are not aware that she is on the stage" (with a fine hint of irony at ignorance so unlikely)—"her theatrical name is Miss Poppy Delafield."

"I do not think"—with a lofty politeness—"that I have ever had the pleasure of seeing her."

"Then you cannot have been at the Popularity lately," cries the other, her lovely eyes shining like angry jewels, "or you could not have failed to notice her."

"*Miss Poppy Delafield!* No; it is very stupid of me, but I am afraid I can't recall her."

"Oh, her name is not on the bills!" retorts Miss Poppy's champion, with ostentatious carelessness, as if in the case of so great an artist such a detail were supererogatory. "She has a walk on in *A Woman's Danger*, but she is getting on splendidly all the same."

"I have no doubt of it."

"I should have gone on the stage too if Jim had not over-persuaded me into marrying him. I told him at the time that I did not think he realized what a sacrifice I was making for him; but at all events I have rubbed it well in since."

The camel's back breaks. "I think, if you do not mind, I will go to my room."

Miss Kergouet acquiesces nonchalantly, and having inducted her guest into the desired bower, leaves her with an equally nonchalant explanation that the room is Esmeralda's, that it is not improbable that a good deal of her raiment may still be lurking there, as well as stray articles of her own trousseau; but that on occasions of this kind one must be prepared to rough it a little.

The shutting of the door tells Lettice that the infinitely desired solitude is attained; but at first she does not seem to know how to use the precious boon. She stands in the middle of the room, with her arms hanging down by her sides, and her mouth shut tight like a box. Her life hitherto has given

so little opening for the exercise of angry passions; her course has run so smoothly on the wheels of courteous good breeding, that she does not know how to deal with the congestion of rage and disgust that is suffocating her. Hardly conscious of what she is doing, she begins to repeat to herself, in a voice of quiet fury, the phrases that had broken down her self-command—"over-persuaded me into marrying him," "did not realize what a sacrifice I was making for him," "have rubbed it well in since."

Pored over in repetition they sound even more monstrous than when airily shot out of the mouth whose curved red loveliness fails to win their pardon.

"Insufferable little upstart! When she ought to be grovelling on her knees, thanking God that Jim should have stooped to her! I will tell her so. She piques herself on always saying what comes uppermost. I will pay her the compliment of imitating her."

* * * * *

Somewhere about nine o'clock a gong, violently banged by an obviously amateur hand, which has apparently usurped the office of the butler, tells Miss Trent that the hybrid meal, not very confidently promised by the mistress of the house, is actually served.

"I must keep myself in hand," she says, with a farewell glance at her own rigid face in the glass; and so goes down, allowing herself no further delay. Arrived on the ground-floor landing, she looks in some uncertainty at the three or four pitch-pine doors that open upon it, doubtful as to

which leads into the disorderly drawing-room, and afraid of incautiously finding herself in the sanctum of that as yet unknown horror the father of the family, or of tumbling into the embrace of the probably still more terrible—since a young vulgarian is a far worse thing than an old one—eldest son of the house. She is not long, however, in being enlightened, though the method in which the knowledge is brought to her is not perhaps quite what she would have chosen. A more careful look shows her that one of the doors is ajar, and through it she catches a glimpse of a muslin-clad figure standing before the fire; and which, though she cannot see the whole of it, is obviously entwined with that of an unseen man, upon whose shoulder its head is conjecturally laid.

Lettice hesitates. Jim must have arrived. Will he bless her for breaking in upon the privacy of his ecstatic greeting? That moment's vacillation is Miss Trent's undoing. Through the half-open door the high, piercing, clear voice whose utterances have hitherto so very much displeased her is heard in the accents of lamentation and complaint that yet have a whiff of laughter about them.

"She is *much* worse than I expected, and I have got to live with her for ever and ever and *ever!* Pretty? Not in the least. Poor old Jim in petticoats."

The listener stands petrified; certainly with no wish for further eavesdropping, but turned to stone by the shock of what she has heard. Yet it is her very own phrase that is returned upon her, "Much worse than I had expected!" And to whom is the confidence made? Not to Jim, since he would not

need to be told that she is not pretty—that she is “poor old Jim in petticoats.”

Whoever the man may be, it is impossible for her to go in and ascertain—physically impossible that, in the face of what she has just heard, she should present herself to the person whose unvarnished opinion of her has just reached her tingling ears. She turns, and runs upstairs again; but before she can reach her own room finds herself on the landing all but in collision with a figure hastily issuing from another. They jump apart.

“I beg ten thousand pardons. Miss Trent?”

“Yes.”

For a moment both are too much taken aback to speak; but a single glance has explained to Lettice that the tall spare personage against whom she has cannoned, with his half-youthful air of *ex-belhomme* and smart soldier, must be the master of the house. It was not, then, to her parent that Miss Kergouet had been detailing her woes.

The parent holds out his hand, but the action is marked by that uncertainty and diffidence which had been so conspicuously absent from his daughter's manner; and the guest at once thinks of the cloud which in her mind has always enveloped him, and from which indeed he is no more separable in her thoughts than is Jupiter from his thunder-bolt or Venus from her cestus. The sense of his obvious want of ease and the consciousness of its cause, restores her to self-possession.

“I heard a gong,” she says, “and supposed——”

“Of course, naturally,” he breaks in nervously.

“It was one of the girls who sounded it. Of

course, she had no business; but they are in such 'spirits—quite out of hand to-night."

The thought of the cause which has driven the cadets of Kergouet to let out their exuberant joy in beating tom-toms like savages, stiffens Miss Trent's muscles.

"Perhaps I am too early?" she says, with a not-consciously ironical look at a cuckoo clock on the stairs, which, however, refuses to incriminate its owner by the simple method of not going. "Miss Kergouet told me that you were not very strict about hours."

Something—perhaps the formality of the "Miss Kergouet"—seems to heighten her companion's discomfort.

"On the contrary, it is we who are late. I ought to apologize! I am afraid we are incorrigible."

He concludes his sentence by a deprecating offer to show her the way, and précède her down the stairs, ejaculating as he goes expressions of pleasure at her arrival, and nervous assertions of Marie's eagerness to make her acquaintance.

CHAPTER VI

PROTECTED by the ægis of her host's company, Lettice does really enter the drawing-room this time, and the two young women, who have at least agreed in one thing—identity in the expression of their reciprocal dislike—stand once again in each other's presence. But the awkwardness of the meeting for Miss Trent is much lessened by the fact that the room is now full of figures, and the noise of several ungoverned voices out-shouting each other.

For a moment or two the new-comer cannot quite distinguish which of the closely linked loud group could have been the bride's confidant, so deeply is he imbedded in a circle of younger brothers and sisters, who evidently see him for the first time since their arrival from Paris. But though Marie has to a certain extent yielded to the superior claims upon him of her juniors, she has not quite loosed her hold, but has her hand still passed through his arm.

A little shifting of the figures reveals that the object of so much attention must be the nonpareil elder brother Gabriel of his sister's hymn of praise, the "something in a bank" of her own hold-cheap classification. The group melts, and its component parts are piloted to her with anxious politeness by their parent.

"I think that these children have not as yet the pleasure of knowing you. This is Gabriel, these are Muriel and Sybil, this is Louis, and this little fellow is Frank."

The introduction is immediately followed by the rapid advance upon the guest of two tall half-grown girls, who, without the slightest hesitation, and much to her discomfiture, each imprint upon her cheek a hard smacking kiss; a muffish-looking un-English lad, with his hair *en brosse*, lays a salute upon her hand, and the infant Frank, a child of five or six, whose entrance into life must—as Miss Trent instantly decides—have been coincident with his mother's exit from it, extends to her a hand sticky with much chocolate. The elder brother contents himself with a bow.

"I suppose we may as well go into dinner," says the young hostess, nonchalantly throwing the suggestion at the guest. "The gong meant nothing, it was Syb who sounded it; but we never have things announced. Of course"—to her father—"we will not wait for 'The Freak.'"

"Who is *The Freak*?" asks Lettice of her host a minute later, when, having crossed the passage on his arm, she finds herself sitting beside him at the dinner-table.

The question is the first outcome of a desperate resolve to keep herself in hand and be agreeable, but the person to whom it is addressed seems to receive it with hesitating embarrassment.

"It is only a silly joke of Marie's, really not worth explaining."

But, unfortunately, Marie has overheard. Down the table come her ringing accents.

"Jim is The Freak. I took him to Barnum's one day, and he is so exactly like one of the fat men there that I have called him 'The Freak' ever since."

Miss Trent had asked for the explanation, so cannot complain at having got it; yet its unparalleled impertinence staggers her so much that she has only just presence of mind left to turn her blazing eyes upon her own plate, but not before they have met those of the young man absurdly called Gabriel. If he were a member of any other family she would say that his expressed a respectful compassion, but it is impossible that so delicate a sentiment can emanate from one of this rabble rout.

No awkward silence follows Miss Kergouet's exegesis of her pleasantries, since silence and the younger Miss Kergouets cannot co-exist. They usurp the conversation, noisily relating their Parisian experiences, contradicting each other freely, and only uniting to "sit upon" the flaccid Louis, and pamper with unwholesome delicacies the little spoilt Frank. As to appetites, like ogres, they unite voices like steam-whistles, the rest of the company are relieved of the necessity of speech.

Marie has with Bohemian ease put both her elbows on the table, and leaning one cheek against her knitted hands, is carrying on an eager conversation with her eldest brother. Her high-pitched voice is tamed to almost a whisper, and she makes no more effort to mitigate the din around her than she would to stop a thunderstorm that had broken over the house.

There being no call upon Lettice's tongue, and the viands presented to her offering no great at-

traction to her palate, Miss Trent gives her eyes free play, and scans with no lenient glance the family which—since it is clear that he who espouses one Kergouet espouses all—her brother is in forty-eight hours to wed. It is impossible to deny that good looks have been dealt out to them with no grudging hand, to Marie most lavishly, to Gabriel perhaps least.

Having made the circuit of the family, she begins again with him. Yes, he is certainly the least regularly handsome of them, and yet if she had to decide which among these detestable faces were to force themselves upon her daily life, she would choose his. It has not the self-willed insolence of Marie's, nor the impudent *aplomb* of the younger sisters. In fact, she is not quite sure that a slight skirt of the family cloud—the cloud in which they ought all to be enwrapped, and from which most of them are so brazenly free—does not lie across his features. His eyes are not shifty like his father's; they had met her own full and direct upon their first introduction, though they have never strayed towards her since, nor has his manner the uneasy obsequiousness of his parent's, and yet——

“I am afraid you find us rather noisy,” says her host, breaking in upon her observations in that deprecatory tone which she has already charitably docketed as “servile.”

He looks at her out of the corner of his eye—the eye of a reformed *viveur*, which, however sincere and long-established the reformation, never fails to tell ill-natured tales. The poor man has no new sins to conceal, and his askance look is due only to the fact that she frightens him very much

indeed. Also an experience stretching over many years and showing you the majority of your acquaintance invariably occupied by some object in the opposite hedge when they meet you in the road, does not conduce to making you bold-faced.

"To any one not used to a large family, I fear we must seem rather overpowering."

"We are—we have been a very humdrum little household, my brother and I," replies she, not able to induce her tongue to frame the monosyllable "Jim." "Ah, here he is!"

A smile of relief and affectionate pleasure breaks over her face, giving scope to the only one of the Kergouet family who is at leisure for the observation to notice what a wide range of expression she can exhibit, and what very pretty teeth her hitherto pinched lips have hidden. She stretches out her hand to the hasty figure who must pass her to get to its vacant place beside the hostess, but it does not even perceive her. It is the first time that the fact has been brought home to her that henceforth she will be practically invisible to her brother. She draws back her hand, but not before she is aware that the same member of the family who had observed its going out is aware of its ignominious retreat.

Marie flings her left hand to her lover nonchalantly, and says—

"Do not apologize. You know that there is nothing in the world I hate so much as punctuality. These are the children"—waving her other hand round the table.

At once four chairs are pushed back, and the innocents alluded to precipitate themselves upon

their future brother-in-law. The girls lead the way, and kiss him as smackingly and with as matter-of-fact an absence of hesitation as they had done his sister. He *must* be taken aback, in fact, he reddens a little, yet there is no evidence that he dislikes the assault.

His metamorphosis is even more complete than Lettice had known it to be. The dinner is brought back for him in tepid instalments, of whose unappetizingness he appears as unaware as he is of everything else that is not Marie. The latter has resumed her eager talk with her brother, despite what Miss Trent has to admit to herself are the persevering efforts of the young man to turn her eloquence into that channel to which it now rightly belongs. He does not succeed; but it is probably due to him that she now and then throws a word, or an eye-flash, or a pat on the coat-sleeve to her neglected lover. The latter acquiesces with unclouded good humour, and there is not the faintest shadow on the face he presents to his sister when he takes the vacant seat on the sofa beside her—a seat upon which there cannot be said to be much run—in the drawing-room after dinner.

“Well?”

The monosyllable is perfectly understood by both to be only a bid for the praise he is greedy to hear. Yet all she answers is another “Well?”

He has to dot his i's. “Is she like what you expected?”

“Exactly, only more so.”

She has taken pains with her tone, and apparently with success, for he rejoins warmly—

"I knew that it would be all right when once you saw her."

To agree in so erroneous a conclusion or to demonstrate its falsity are equally impossible; so she embarks on another branch of the subject.

"She seems very fond of her own family."

"Wrapped up in them! It is wonderfully pretty to see her with them, isn't it? They *are* very attractive?"—an inflection of anxious asking. "I had not seen the children before."

"No?"

"They will wake us up, won't they?"

"Are they to—to live at Trent?"

"No, not *live*; of course, they will be at school, but they are to spend their holidays with us. I promised her that she should not be parted from them altogether. It would have broken her heart."

"Yes?"

"And it will be a good thing for us, too, to have a little more life about the house; we have been a bit sleepy, haven't we?"

She does not answer, not from ill-temper, but from heart-fullness. She had imagined herself to have modelled their life so exactly upon his likings.

"Ah, they are singing that capital thing out of *The Ripping Girl*," as a well-known music-hall song of the moment comes, wafted by the conjoined lung and voice power of the whole Kergouet family, from the back drawing-room—

"Oh, why was I left in the cart?"

(humming delightedly).

A moment later, unable to resist a fascination as strong as that of—

"My mother Circe and the sirens three
Among the flowery-kirtled Naiades,"

he flies to join the vocal band.

Little inclination as she has to do so, Lettice feels that for the sake of appearances she must follow his example, and has half risen to do so when through the plushette *portière* she sees the heir of the Kergouets advancing to her rescue.

"I would not, if I were you," he says, answering her intention. "You will be better here—a little further from our din."

She reseats herself. Of course, he will think it necessary to sit down by her; but, after all, it is the least of two evils, and she can keep him at a proper distance. And as to talk, the clamour from the next room has changed into a confused bawling. In the elation of her spirits, the terrible Sybil is proceeding to demonstrate how well she can play the piano by sitting upon it, and is being noisily hauled off the keys by other members of her family. It needs an excursion on the part of the elder brother to quell the raging bear-fight. He returns victorious, and apparently not at all ruffled; but there is nothing like habit.

"We are not always as bad as this; to-night it is a sort of Bump supper."

"Because you are Head of the River?"

The form her rejoinder takes is caused only by an impulse to show that she is up in Oxford phraseology; but the moment the words are out of her mouth she sees the cynical irony of the interpretation they may bear. Is it her fancy that he gives a slight start?

"I dare say you will understand that if we were

not in such very high spirits, we might be in very low ones."

"Why?"

"We are very glad that you should have her"—glancing towards the piano—"but we can hardly be said to be glad to lose her."

Even Miss Trent can find nothing servile in this remark, nor do either words or tone betray any consciousness of the magnificence of the bargain struck by the Kergouet family. An indistinct sense of apprehension that she will not be able to despise him with as comfortable a completeness as she does his father makes curt her next speech.

"You will doubtless still see a great deal of her."

"That is not quite the same thing as living together."

This is indisputable.

"And personally I shall not see a great deal of her, as I have only a month's holiday in the year."

That he has divined Lettice's attitude of mind towards his family is conveyed by his telling her the fact in a tone which shows that he thinks he is giving her a welcome piece of information. Her drooping brow clears but little, yet he pursues in the same strain.

"Esmeralda—she is my eldest sister—is very much tied by her profession, she is not often free; the children have other relations who will want them for a good part of their holidays; and my father scarcely ever pays visits."

In the watches of the subsequent night, Miss Trent asks herself with uneasy astonishment what could have prompted her to do it; but at this point, having hitherto been sitting looking unfriendly

straight before her, she turns her whole face suddenly upon the young man.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

There is a moment's pause, though something whispers her it is not of hesitation, on his part.

"Do you think that I need answer that question?"

She feels herself changing colour. "Do not questions generally expect an answer?"

"Well, then, I did it to relieve your mind."

The response that she has insisted upon makes her extremely angry. He whom she had mentally determined to keep in his proper place, well at a distance, has evaded her guard, and got close up to her; though by no means in the way she had apprehended.

He has done a worse thing still, for he has made her feel excessively small.

"I suppose that Miss Kergouet——" she begins, then pulls up short, recalling with confusion the means by which she has learnt her future sister-in-law's opinion of her.

He merely repeats, "Miss Kergouet," as if it were a lesson in dictation that she were giving him; but she divines the governed indignation with which he receives the slight to his sister implied in the shirking of her Christian name.

She replies unnecessarily to the guessed reproach.

"You must remember that I have never seen her till to-day, and if you knew me you would understand that I do not easily grow intimate with people."

"Without knowing you, I understand it."

She turns over in her angry mind whether this is not an impertinence; but before she can decide he speaks again.

"Marie has told me——"

"Yes, I know."

The red haste with which she interrupts him fills him with surprise.

"What do you know?"

But Lettice has lost her head. A hundred years ago she would have been said to "arch her neck." In 1900 she merely pulls it out like a telescope.

"I know that, highly as her expectations were raised, she has found me far worse than she expected. Her voice is very clear, and I was unfortunately close to the door of the room when you were discussing me."

If her object were to put Kergouet out of countenance, she certainly succeeds; and yet somehow he still seems to get the better of her.

"I must return your question upon you. Why have you told me this?"

"I had no intention of telling you. I do not know why I have done so now. After all, you were not to blame. *You* are not responsible for your sister's——"

"I am quite willing to be responsible for her."

They look at each other combatively, and yet with a contradictory sense of dawning reciprocal attraction. If he were not a Kergouet, I should like him for standing up for his sister, is the girl's grudging thought; and, How extremely objectionable she is making herself; but what did Marie mean by saying that she was not good-looking? is the no less unwilling reflection of the man.

The once more swelling mirth in the back room, though neither interlocutor is conscious of hearing it, fills up the stormful pause, and gives Lettice time to regain something of self-control.

"It would have been better taste not to have mentioned it."

The proud humility of the admission affects him with a compunction so great that he himself feels it to be out of drawing. But he has the sense not to try to explain away the unexplainable. Yet he must manage to put something mollifying into his silence, for her neck—it is longer than is fashionable, but he likes it—begins to carry her head less inimically erect, and that head—oh that Marie's hair were ever so exquisitely neat!—has something of a rueful droop.

"We began badly. Without knowing who I was, she was very rude to me in the train."

"And you?"

"I?"

"Were you rude too?"

"She has told you that I was?"

The unfashionable white column of her throat is going to fell him again.

"You answer my question by another."

"I was not rude. I had to protect my unfortunate maid; but I was not rude! I am never rude! It would be contrary to all the traditions of my family to be so."

"Yes?"

There is no hint of unbelief in his monosyllable, nor any raising of an eyebrow; yet she knows that he is perfectly unconvinced of her immutable civility.

"You imply that——"

"I imply nothing. I am not fond of implications." Miss Trent laughs angrily. "We are each singing our own praises rather absurdly."

He leans back against the sofa-cushions, with his hands knit behind his head, and gives a tired sigh.

"She is overdone and run down, and sorry to leave us; but I suppose all that will not count for much with you. First impressions are everything, and you will go through life seeing her with your mind's eye perpetually pulling up windows that you wish to put down."

Stated thus, the case for the prosecution seems a ludicrously bad one, and the prosecutor feels it.

"You are determined to put me in the wrong."

"You are mistaken. I have no wish to put you in the wrong. I should like to put you in good humour with us all, if I only knew how—for Marie's sake."

She looks at him thoughtfully with a kindling cheek at that, and a series of blue comparisons with her eyes runs irrelevantly through his head.

"Do you expect me to bully her very much?"

"At first, perhaps, until you get used to her."

The honesty of his answer forbids her face to cool.

"At first!" she repeats. "Well, there will be no at last. I can relieve your mind, as you said just now that you wished to do mine. I am not going to live with them."

The joy she had expected to read in the face near her is less apparent than its surprise.

"I had understood differently. I thought that your brother refused to part with you."

"I am of age."

A pause. The master-spirit, and the master-lungs of Miss Sybil have again won the victory in the adjoining room, but this time her elder brother allows her to

"Fill the air with barbarous dissonance"

unreproved.

"Marie has not an idea that she is turning you out."

"No; she thinks that she will have to live with me 'for ever and ever and ever.'"

The phrase is so apparent a quotation that it robs him of speech, and it is Miss Trent who resumes.

"But she is not turning me out; I am turning myself out."

He looks at her with a compassion that all her raised quills cannot hinder.

"I wish it was not a law of nature that no one can laugh without making some one else cry."

Her eyes meet his in undisguised astonishment, and once again, as when he had seen her stretch an unregarded hand to her brother, he realizes their possibilities of gentleness.

"Are you trying to look at it from my point of view?"

"I can do it without trying."

* * * * *

Worn out with the successive mortifications and disgusts of the day, wretchedly out of her element, seething with miserable wrath and death-wounded pride, it is no wonder that this shaft of sympathy from the heart of the enemy's camp finishes off

poor Miss Trent. A horrible fear assails her that in a moment irresistible tears will have mastered her. It is an untold relief to find that her companion is doing the one wise thing under the circumstances, and leaving her to herself. By the time that he returns with Marie in tow she is quite presentable.

"Gabriel says that you are tired. He thinks that you would like to go to bed."

There is, at all events, no over-setting sympathy in the tone, and Miss Kergouet utters her sentence with a parrot-like air, which suggests dictation.

"I *am* rather tired."

"Of course, you would not care to stay up and see Esmeralda?"

This query is not dictated. The form of it is rather hostile; but there is an underlying incredulity in her own statement. Does that person exist who would not wish to stay up and see Esmeralda, fresh from the glories of her "walk on"?

Lettice hesitates. Shall she take the olive-branch, strange sport in vegetation as it is? The whole family, quiet for the moment, await her decision. Behind the sister's untidy Bohemian brilliance she sees the brother's eyes asking her to assent. That decides her.

"Thank you; but I am afraid I am rather tired."

The girl turns away with an undisguised resentment in the whisk of her skirt, and Gabriel lights the guest's candle in silence.

Sometimes in after days she thinks that things might have been different if she had stayed up on that first night to see Esmeralda.

CHAPTER VII

THOUGH Lettice has declined to see Esmeralda, it is beyond the power of walls and doors to prevent her from hearing her. Very soon after leaving the company her ears tell her that the Popularity has restored the flower of its supers to her family; and a voice of the same quality as Marie's, only much more so—a very clarion of piercing soprano—henceforth dominates the general din.

Esmeralda has evidently much to tell; and while she narrates, the rest of the rout check their mirth to listen. Even during the "Bump" supper that follows, when everybody talks at once, and which is prolonged well into the small hours, the newcomer's voice finds its only real rival in Sybil's. When at length a move is made bedwards, no one seems able to get further than the passage outside the guest's door, where alarums and excursions continue to take place, and would be continuing still, but for the armed interposition of some one—Miss Trent has not much difficulty in guessing whom. This unseen deliverer, finding strenuous words and "hushes" unavailing, is clearly driven to lifting, shoving, and pushing the members of his family into their several rooms, and locking them in. Protests from inside, prettily set off by kicks on the panels, make night lively yet a while longer; and then at last silence falls.

Lettice is awoke by her maid, who, recovered and disdainful, apologizes for the lateness of her morning tea.

"I could not get it before. There was nobody about. I never saw such a place. You can't get anything."

"It is not of the least consequence."

"I asked what hour breakfast was at, and they laughed and said there never was any particular hour for anything here; that everybody had it just when they liked in their bedrooms."

"It does not in the least matter."

"The ladies and the young gentlemen are all running about the passages in their nightgowns. I met the one that came last night—she is an actress, isn't she?—close to your door."

The prevalent enthusiasm for the drama has not penetrated to the steward's room at Trent, and the tone is not one of admiration.

"I suppose a wedding always upsets a household," replies her mistress, driven grudgingly to the defence of the family; but not feeling able to keep up the tone, feigns sleep to avoid the necessity.

When she leaves her room, an hour and a half later, the state of things is not materially changed from that protestingly indicated by her maid. The family is still pervading the passages, though the nightgowns of the servant's heated fancy translate themselves into more or less rumpled *peignoirs*. The master of the house and his eldest son are the only two absent from the promenade concert.

Esmeralda is one of the first to be met; and neither the consciousness of a fringe, still very

much in bud, nor any bashfulness at the poor repair of her wrapper, impair the affectionate liveliness of her greeting.

"We must introduce ourselves," she cries, gaily. "I am Esmeralda, and you are——" The word "Lettice" is evidently trembling on her lips, but something in the icy blue of the eye that meets her freezes it there, and she substitutes, "You are Jim's sister, about whom he has raved so to us."

The ludicrous misapplication of such a verb to her tongue-tied brother calls up a frosty smile, which sets Esmeralda going again.

"I was *so* disappointed not to see you last night, but they told me you were tired. I hope we did not disturb you much. We tried to make as little noise as we could."

A grotesque wonder as to what the Kergouet notion of noise must be runs through Miss Trent's brain, and perhaps relaxes her features a little.

"I am afraid the children got a little wild, but we were really nearly as bad ourselves."

"Yes?"

"Such a piece of luck does not happen every day."

Lettice tries to smile. Can the good resolutions she has been making while dressing—the compunction at her own behaviour which a disappointed look seen through the flame of a bedroom candle last night inspired—can they hold out against the blatant exultation of this creature over what she must know to be no subject of exultation to her?

She struggles feebly. "I am glad you are pleased."

The face beaming below its crop of hair-curlers, and like Marie's as the dreadful copies on female easels on student days in the National Gallery are like the *Vierge des Rochers*, falls a little.

"Oh, you have heard, then?"

"*Have heard?*"

"Yes; my great piece of news—the piece of news I brought down last night, which made us all lose our heads?"

A ray of light begins to illumine the hopeless mystification that the last two sentences have produced in Lettice's mind. It is not, then, their extravagant good fortune in becoming connected with herself that has set the Kergouets shouting.

"No, I have not heard."

"Crawley, my manager, has promised me the understudy of the *soubrette's* part in the new piece.

She stops dramatically, as if comment could but weaken the effect of this tremendous announcement.

"*The understudy!*"

"Yes; but it is really almost as good as having the part. Miss Tiny Villiers, who plays it, had influenza badly twice last winter, and she is sure to have it again."

There is such a certainty of being deeply interesting, such an absolute want of suspicion as to not being sympathized with in the whole tone of the speaker, that Miss Trent is juggled for the moment into thinking that she too must be wishing the plague of "grippe" to alight on the unknown artist.

"He told me only last night. It is so fortunate that it should have happened just now, when we are all so anxious to keep up Marie's spirits."

"Do you think her so much to be pitied?"

"Oh no. No, of course not. Of course, we must all get married some time or other; and Jim is an old darling. But the first break in a family is always a bit of a wrench!"

This speech, like several former ones heard beneath the same roof, makes Miss Trent dumb. What lesser effect could be produced by the obvious fact that the whole clanjamfry of the Kergouets are perfectly unaware of the gigantic *coup* they have made, all their elation being reserved for this miserable little bit of theatrical promotion!

The colloquy is broken into by the bride-elect, who here issues from her bower with a toilette somewhat more advanced than her sister's. She, too, is in a dressing-gown, but the rings of her beautiful dark hair are curling unconfined about the low and lovely squareness of her forehead. Seen beside the original, the execrableness of the poor copy is more patent than before.

"So you have made acquaintance already!" Marie says, in an off-hand voice, that has yet a strong tinge of satisfaction in it. Then, turning to Lettice with more cordiality than she has yet shown—"Do you think Esmeralda like me?"

"Ye-es."

Strange as it may seem, the answer is evidently the one expected, and gives complete satisfaction.

"I knew you would. When she is made up for the stage we might be mistaken for one another."

"I should scarcely have thought that."

"We should have brought down the house as 'Sebastian' and 'Viola.'"

It is clear that the actress guesses at the stranger's demurrer to this, for she says good-humouredly—

"I am her understudy."

The word and its associations exhilarate them both so much that they have to do a little bear-fighting with their juniors, who have now joined the group, to work it off; and the suggested need of keeping up Marie's spirits recurs ironically to her future sister-in-law's mind as she stands in her tall, neat freshness—the typical morning English-woman—watching them.

"You will not mind entertaining yourself, I dare say, to-day?" says Marie, coming back out of breath, and still off-hand, but not hostile. "I shall be frightfully busy! My club girls are coming down to see the presents, for one thing, and they are not half unpacked."

"Your club girls?"—with a gasp of surprise at this glimpse of unexpected philanthropy.

"Yes; I have a club of ballet-girls. Dear mother began it."

"Indeed?"

"And my gown has never turned up; and there is a mistake about the waiters; and some people are coming to dinner to-night—I can't remember who or how many, as I have mislaid most of the notes, but I dare say it will be all right."

She says it with perfect serenity—a serenity shared by all her listeners save one.

"And then there is a rehearsal at the church at three," continues the bride. "Of course, it is a

bore to have to be married two days running, but if you do a thing, you may as well do it well; and if Jim is not coached beforehand, he is such a dear old idiot that he is sure to get on my wrong side, or put the ring on my wrong hand."

It is irrational of Miss Trent to think that her sisterhood of a lifetime entitles her to feel indignation at this little mushroom acquaintance of a month calling her brother names; but its want of reason does not prevent her from swelling inwardly, and repeating over to herself the words, "Freak!" "Idiot!"

This being her attitude of mind, it is perhaps as well that, for the rest of the day, she has no continuous intercourse with her future relation, being aware of her only in sudden flashes, flying about the house, pealing bells, boxing ears, sending wires, giving orders in her ringing voice, and repeating them still more ringingly, when, as seems often the case, they are not attended to. She is to be seen in her most characteristic light, perhaps, while exhibiting her presents to the thirty or forty *coryphées* who, about noon, inundate the house.

Lettice has volunteered her help in entertaining them, but the loudness of their riotous voices and the easy familiarity of their manners make her shrivel into her shell; and she is wonder-stricken to observe with how little apparent disrelish Miss Kergouet allows them to insert their dirty hands within her arm, to finger her dress, and even approach their wild heads, and wilder plumes, to her lovely face.

Jim has been pressed into the service, and does great credit to his training by the unblenching way

in which he bears the startling and affectionate candour of the young ladies' comments upon his appearance and situation.

In the displaying of the wedding gifts new food for astonishment is afforded to Lettice by the observation of how very much greater value is attached by the bride to the tawdry trifles given by some "old friend of dear mother's," or obscure player whose name has never reached the public ear, than to the solid values and refined beauties of the offerings from the Trent side.

With an unbiassed mind Lettice might have confessed that she whom she has dubbed an adventuress is at least quite innocent of greed; but prejudice forbids her to see anything in the preference but want of taste.

The guests enjoy themselves so much that it is difficult to induce them to depart, which they entirely decline to do until all have embraced the bride. Some of them—and it is not their fault that it is a minority—snatch a kiss from the bridegroom too. The exhibition and its attendant humours have taken so long that there is time for only a very few mouthfuls of bolted luncheon before the rehearsal in the church. It is with deep repugnance that Mr. Trent's sister takes part in this manœuvre, and with a very big heart that she walks up the aisle alongside of Esmeralda, in the improbability for the occasion of a sealskin coat and hat, and listening to the scarcely subdued invectives of the also hatted and coated bride against her page brothers for crowding too close to her, and forgetting her oft-repeated information that her train will be six yards long. There is a good

deal of scuffling between Muriel and Sybil as to which shall occupy in the procession the left-hand place next that side of the church which is to be occupied by the bride's friends, their approval being the object coveted by both girls, who are apparently quite indifferent to any notice from the Trent half of the party. Esmeralda—as beaming as she herself is inwardly protesting—whispers to her a delighted query as to whether a wedding does not always remind her of the church scene in “Much Ado.” She answers at once that it does not, having yet to learn that the stage is the most corroding of all professions, eating so deeply into its votaries that they end, and sometimes indeed begin, by seeing the footlights between them and the whole scheme of creation.

The bride's exhortations are by this time diverted from her pages to her bridegroom, whom she is rating, in a tone which only now and then remembers to adapt itself to the sacredness of the place, for his clumsiness in manœuvring. She is urging him not to forge ahead of her like a steam tram, when they mount the chancel steps in their advance to the altar; not to look too pleased, etc. It is only for her father that she has nothing but gentlest words and looks, as she gives him her directions where to stand and what to do.

“I need not tell *you* not to look too pleased, need I, darling?” Lettice overhears her softly saying to him, and, to the girl's astonishment, she sees two tears entangled in her fabulously long eyelashes.

This pretty touch ought to have pleased Miss Trent; but when we have made up our minds that

a fellow creature is unmitigatingly to be disapproved, nothing upsets our balance like the cropping up of an inconvenient merit or grace; and Lettice tries to persuade herself that the whisper, so obviously intended for only one ear, is stagey.

The arrangement of details, the talking and "hushing," and talking again, the disposition to giggle on the part of the juniors, the grotesque image of a performing bear, which will recur to her in connection with the grave docility of her brother's efforts servilely to obey his leader's orders, combine to jade Lettice's spirits so much that on their return to Acacia Lodge she asks to be allowed to have tea in her bedroom.

Esmeralda insists on bringing it, and, with what is real though unrecognized self-denial, since she is dying to make one of the group that follows their Marie about on this final day like Tantiny pigs, stays half an hour with the guest to prevent her feeling neglected.

There is more of intellectual effort in following her conversation than might appear on the first flash, since she introduces into it a great many persons of both sexes of whom Miss Trent has never before heard, but who all seem more or less to have their habitation in the Green Room, by their Christian names, and with a naïve confidence that the hearer will know all about them. By the end of the half-hour her head and ears are full of a whirl of Reggies, and Willys, and Phyllises, and Florences. They are scarcely cleared of their unusual inmates when she goes down to dinner.

The room is full of people, a great many more than the young hostess's largest computation had

reckoned on having turned up, and dinner has to be considerably delayed to allow of a relief table being rigged up in a corner of the dining-room. Nobody seems to care a straw. At dinner, deposed from her place of honour beside the host—for which he thinks it necessary to offer her a long and too humble apology—Lettice sits between a couple of strangers, each of whom, through no fault of theirs, has an elbow nestling in her ribs. The expected waiters are still conspicuous by their absence, so that the attendance is of the “scratchiest,” and the food shows a disposition to fall short. But again nobody seems to care a jot. Even distant Gabriel, whose dark glance she meets now and again, gauging her condition rather anxiously between the candle-shades, is merrier when he is not looking at her than is quite consistent with her good opinion of him. Her manner might show this when he goes up to speak to her after dinner were she not really glad to see him, since his coming frees her from the delicate dilemma in which Esmeralda has put her by claiming her joyful sympathy in the news just brought by Ronny Howard that Florrie Cavendish’s engagement is on again.

“And has Miss Trent the faintest idea who Florrie Cavendish is?”

Lettice shakes her head. “I am afraid I have not.”

“You do not say so!” cries Esmeralda, genuinely surprised, but not at all offended. “I thought everybody knew Florrie;” and so goes off to repeat her tidings to more understanding ears.

“Esmeralda has a touching faith that every-

body knows and loves everybody else," says her brother.

It is to the touch of irony in his voice, even more than his words, that her not very amiable answer is addressed.

"How beautifull!"

He takes the wind out of her sails by acquiescing.

"Yes, in a way I think it is."

"You do not suffer from the same amiable delusion?"

"No."

"Does—does Marie?"

It comes with difficulty, but there can be no mistake as to the Christian name having been produced at last.

"Do you mean does she herself love everybody? I should say not; but when she does care for people she does it thoroughly."

Silenced for the moment by the emphasis of this encomium, Lettice's eyes wander to the object of it, who is rather obscured from sight by the fact that both the large Muriel and small Frank are sitting on her slender knees. She has caught one of her father's hands as he passed near her, and is detaining him by swinging it gently to and fro. It is not a conventional attitude for the hostess of a large party, but as in the case of the crowded dinner-table and over-taxed commissariat, everybody seems to think it all right.

Lettice repeats the young man's words slowly.

"Does it thoroughly! For your father, for one?"

"I should rather think so."

Miss Trent's eyes have lit with unconscious dis-

paragement upon the damaged gentleman, but the almost defiant championship in his son's voice makes her drop them with an uneasy sense of detection.

"And for Miss Esmeralda?"

"And for Miss Esmeralda."

"And for you?"

"I hope so."

"And for those two big girls?"

There is something contemptuous in her not having taken the trouble to master their names, which comes out more plainly in his echo of her phrase—

"And for those two big girls."

Her memory recovers itself ere the next question.

"And for Lewis and Frank?"

"Yes."

"And for—Jim?"

There is something significant, as both are aware, in her putting this last name at the tail of her queries.

"Would she be marrying him if she did not?"

His quiet ignoring of the possibility of sordid motives does not hide from her that he has detected her suspicions, and shame hurries her into an illogical rejoinder.

"Then why does she call him names?"

"What names?"

"Freak, Luney! What point is there in calling a person a lunatic when he is particularly remarkable for common sense?"

"Perhaps that is the point."

A slight movement of eyelid and nostril implies

that in her opinion it is a very poor one. Then it strikes her that once again she is taking him to task for crimes not his own, and she partially softens.

"You have great influence with her—I can see that—I, of course, have none. If you would you might persuade her not to hold him up to ridicule when they go home—not at first. He is very much respected; people would not understand it."

The young man is listening with the most courteous attention, and into his eyes—she cannot now complain of their being too cheerful—has come a look which, if it were not so unlikely, she would say expressed undisguised pity and regret. It is with a rather hopeless sigh that he answers—

"I will try;" adding a moment later, "And in return, will you—I can imagine that to people you loved you might be very——" (he breaks off, apparently finding the sought adjective unfindable) —"will you try to hate her a little less?"

CHAPTER VIII

THAT night Miss Trent is washed into slumber on a sea of tears. Through all her twenty-two years it has been an article of unquestioning faith in her little circle that she is an extremely nice girl, and the belief has insensibly penetrated herself. In most of us there are heights of self-conceit that our nearest and dearest have never scaled, depths of humility that our nearest and dearest have never plumbed.

Not until Gabriel's request had laid it in the dust did Lettice realize how excellent had been her opinion of herself. He had not meant to humble her, merely taking her unamiability for granted, as a fact about which there could be no dispute, and appealing to whatever there might be of good in her to protect his cherished sister against its effects. It gives the measure of how many steps she has descended that a ridiculous streak of comfort crosses her mind that he must have thought there was some good in her, or he would not have appealed at all. This is followed by a flash of angry astonishment that she should deign to care what any member of the Kergouet family think of her. But the first of the two impressions is the stronger.

Sleep in any case would be difficult in the house on the present occasion, since in it this marriage eve

the night and morning noises meet as nearly as in a railway hotel.

The wedding is to be an afternoon one, so that one would have thought that there need not be quite such a scrimmage to get the bride ready in time as there is. Probably there is no need, though it is true that the waiters continue not to turn up, and are discovered at the last moment never to have been ordered. But the real cause lies in the fact that scrimmage is the natural element of the family, in which they joy as the petrel in the storm. The dressing of the bridesmaids, the getting the brother pages into their white satin breeches, even the pinning of the bride's veil, seem to be all more or less conducted in the passage. Here the family appear to run through the gamut of human emotions, from the partly chocolate-fed, and all chocolate-soothed grief of little Frank at his sister's loss to the pale and useless ire of Louis, who, goaded by some crowning insult from his terrible seniors, is heard complaining in a French voice, trembling with anger, to his elder brother—

“My sisters have called me a pig-idiot!”

For Gabriel is in the passage too, though he does not make his toilet there; and though he seems to frequent it more in the effort to evoke some order out of the chaos than from any special preference for it.

The head of the house appears there fitfully also, always so riotously welcomed by his offspring when he does, as to make Lettice ask herself the question, whether to be well beloved the only preliminary step really necessary is to disgrace yourself? He offers her apologies, even more nervous than yes-

terday's, for his household's shortcomings, accompanied by a faltering hope that she has been attended to, and a still more faltering aspiration that when next she does them the honour of visiting them they will be able to make her more comfortable.

Miss Trent wonders afterwards whether it can be due to the dumb entreaty, almost amounting to command, in the son's eyes that she answers the father quite kindly. There is a touch of the *naïvete* that distinguishes the whole family in the method taken by the younger man to reward her.

"It will soon be over now," he says, rolling an arm-chair up to the drawing-room fire for her; "and it is unlikely that you will ever again have to see us all together."

She is dressed too soon, and the draughty house, with every door open, makes her shiver in her thin bridesmaid finery—finery made distasteful by being Marie's choice. She ignores the offered chair, beyond resting an indignant hand upon its back, as she turns to face him.

"What right have you to say such a thing as that to me?"

He is, perhaps, not quite as *naïf* as the rest of his family.

"I meant to be consolatory."

"You have taken a strange method."

Her voice is full of wounded feeling, and, richly as she has deserved his snub, manlike, he already regrets it.

"All I meant to say was that we have, perhaps, a better chance of being liked as units than collectively."

"Was that all you meant?"

Before the true directness of her look his own wavers.

"No, I meant more. I meant to be disagreeable, but I ~~un~~mean it."

Women are seldom generous to a disarmed enemy.

"You cannot unsay it, any more than you can unsay the cruel request that you made me last night. If it is any satisfaction to you, I can tell you that it made me shed bitter tears."

"You are not speaking seriously?"

"It is scarcely a subject upon which I am likely to joke."

There is a pause of consternation on his part, of modified enjoyment on hers. She pursues her advantage.

"At home I have always been thought to be at least human; the implication that I am not naturally gave me something of a shock."

He has been wondering what has become of her cheek roses, and the hearing that it is he who has abolished them puts a compunction she cannot mistake into his lowered voice.

"You have given me a shock. I had certainly no wish to make you cry."

She abuses her superiority. "I feel sure that you meant well; but in the instinct of defending what you loved, you naturally did not pay much attention to any pain you might be inflicting upon a perfectly indifferent stranger."

He is conscious of an inward protest, grotesque in its strength considering the circumstances, against her application of the phrase to herself, coupled

with a repetition of that keen pleasure to the senses which he has already received from her blond comeliness, her shining neatness; and joined to a pitying insight into the physical pain which a creature so exquisitely nice in every detail of her perfect finish must have suffered from the equally perfect disorder of his belongings.

"You had no right to ask me not to hate Jim's wife! You ought to have known that that was impossible."

"I ought."

His acquiescence is less due to conviction than to the delight of his ear in the pitch of her voice.

"On the other hand, I dare say I ought to have tried to be more forbearing towards—your sister!"

This evidently seems to her to be an immense admission; and whatever may be the brother's opinion as to the suitability of the adjective, she makes it with such a pretty air of generous conciliation that he cannot but accept it in the same spirit. He reverts to his former method of consolation, though it had not been particularly successful.

"You will like her much better when you get her away from the rest of us."

"Why do you harp upon that string?" she cries in real displeasure, though her scarcely raised tones show small likeness to the peacock wrath of Esmeralda or Marie.

"Do you wish to see us all together again?"

Her resource is one not devoid of dignity. "These are the kind of things that people do not say," she answers, and walks towards the door. Here she goes near to colliding with the bride, who, her toilette still in an inchoate state, and despite

the shrill remonstrances of her following, has whirled downstairs in search of some forgotten trifle. The sight of her brother's face makes her forget it again.

"What have you been doing to her?" she asks suspiciously. "She was as red as a peony."

"I have not been doing anything."

"What have you been saying, then?"

He hesitates. In an instant, regardless of her laces and tulle, she has flung her arms round his neck.

"Oh, my Gab, if you take to talking secrets that you will not tell *me* to her, what good will my life do me?"

"I have not been talking secrets."

She looses her hold just enough to get the proper distance for reading his face.

"You are not beginning to like her? You do not think her pretty?"

Once again his answer is not glib; and when it comes she detects its evasiveness.

"I think her very—well-groomed," affectionately lifting a little wandering lock as he speaks, and trying to restore it to its place, "which is more than I can say for some other people!"

Marie pushes him away with a vigour equal to that of her late embrace.

"She is like a Dutch garden!"

After that scrimmage resumes its sway for the rest of the day. Never in later life will Lettice's memory be able to present to her its events in any likely or rational sequence. When was it discovered that there was a mistake about the carriages as well as the waiters? And who was it suggested

that the wedding should be put off till next day? It must have been the bride herself. Was it going to or returning from the church itself that the hired landau which conveyed herself and her fellow-bridesmaids galloped at such breakneck speed as bespoke the excess of transport duty laid upon it? Out of the blur of impressions rises a crowded church, one aisle filled with well-known faces, all—or she fancies so—stamped with the same impress of alert curiosity, which makes her avert her own eyes with a sense of humiliated vexation; the other thronged with perfectly unknown persons who make up in numbers for whatever they may lack in distinction; the back of two figures, the shoulders of the smaller of which look suspiciously as if she were sobbing; a cloud of clergy so numerous that the Marriage Service seems hardly long enough to afford each of them a sentence; and a clash of bells which is perhaps the one among her impressions that goes nearest to being a sharp one, carrying with it as it does the flashed knowledge that the odious and irrevocable has happened, and that Marie Kergouet is in fact and for ever Marie Trent. Was it before or after those bells that Esmeralda had bid her in a penetrating whisper look in the fifth row, and she would see her manager, Crawley, sitting within two of Cissy Hartopp of the Pleasantry, and next to Miranda Talbot of the Sphere?

Then they are all back again at Acacia Lodge, and the two dissonant bands of bride and bridegroom's friends are jostling each other in unnatural nearness through the overcrowded rooms. It is not Esmeralda's fault if they do not amalgamate,

as she slips and flits among the incongruous elements, introducing them to each other as far as, and indeed a good deal further than, her knowledge of the names and titles of the unknown half of the company extends, in the happiest confidence that they will all be overjoyed to make each other's acquaintance.

With reluctant admiration Lettice has to own that, whatever the weak points they possess, the Kergouet family are at all events strong in the courage of their friends. And Esmeralda has a good large field for her operations, since Jim has had his kinsfolk and acquaintances summoned from far and near, and they have answered to the call like one man. With his plain, wide face transfigured, he goes about radiantly reaping tributes to his choice. Lettice reaps some too, but with less consequent illumination.

"She is extraordinarily pretty, my dear," says a smart cousin, putting up a tortoiseshell eyeglass—"quite extraordinarily; but who *are* all these people? I never seem to have met any of them before, did you?"

A dull flush burns through the person addressed.

"I think they are chiefly theatrical; you know that the elder sister has gone upon the stage."

"Theatrical?"—with greatly quickened interest. "How exciting! But I do not recognize any of them. Is Wyndham here? or Irene Vanbrugh? or Ellen Terry? or Tree?"

"I do not know; I have not seen them."

Then comes the departure of the newly wedded; Marie kissing and being kissed by everybody—everybody, that is, who had occupied the left side

of the church aisle. On several necks she throws herself. She is strained to many gaily draped bosoms, and is with difficulty dissuaded from acceding to little Frank's blubbered prayer to get into the brougham with her. It is with obvious choking that she pours her last whisper into her father's and Gabriel's ears, though her previous farewell to her new sister-in-law had been marked by a little cold hilarity.

"Good-bye. You can never call me Miss Kergouet again."

Her brother's farewell follows. "Good-bye, old girl! Take care of yourself. I dare say that you will be home as soon as we."

She makes an inarticulate sound that cannot be assent; then, with a pang of revolt against their letting each other go for ever, as it certainly will be, with such a trivial valediction, she clings to him for a moment, faltering—

"I hope you will be very, *very* happy."

He returns her embrace most affectionately, but she detects haste and absence in his clasp.

"Thanks, dear, thanks. There is not much doubt about that. We ought to be off."

The crowd of well-wishers and rice-throwers have turned inwards out of the nipping dusk as soon as the carriage has disappeared; and Lettice follows them, catching as she does so Esmeralda's aspiration as heartfelt as high-pitched.

"*How* I envy them! In Paris for a whole fortnight! and Marie means to go to the theatre every night."

"They have gone to Paris?" repeats the comrade addressed with surprised interest. "It was

put in the papers that Lord Blank had lent them his place in Hertfordshire."

"Marie would not hear of it. She says she will have more country than she knows what to do with for the rest of her natural life. Oh, Miss Trent, I did not see you! *Has not it gone off well?*"

"Was there ever a wedding that *did* not go off well?" asks the voice of Gabriel, hastily interposing—"at least, in the opinion of the family that shot it off?"

"They have promised to be back for the first night of the new play. *You* ought to come too," pursues Esmeralda, with her incorrigible confidence in the sympathy of her fellow-creatures. "Tiny Villiers is sure to get her influenza back before January is over, and then *I* nip in. It is not a big part, but one might make a good deal of it. It depends entirely on the way you play it."

She flashes off to cry her bright confidence in the friendly epidemic into a score of other ears, and invite their owners to her contingent triumph; and her brother remains facing that fellow bridesmaid, the identity of whose dress with his sister's—ironical and momentary—only accentuates the immensity of their difference. He devines that it is the haste to be rid of that distasteful livery which makes her say—

"I must go and change my gown."

"Must you?"

"Of course. I cannot go up to London in this."

His eye travels with a look of acrid melancholy over her gay costume.

"Will you ever wear it again?"

She starts at his having divined her intention of committing the detested costume to the flames.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"But will you?"

"What can it matter to you whether I do or not?"

"Nothing."

There is a flat spiritlessness in the tone of his renunciation, and his face looks as fagged as she feels her own. To him also it has been a trying day. At intervals, through its confusion and chaos, she has caught sight of him now and again, and almost always as propping his father's faint courage, shielding him from doubtful encounter, warding off possible mortification.

The outlaw for twenty-five years from the world's favour has not apparently, even in a quarter of a century, grown a thick enough skin to have faced the ordeal of his first real return to it, if he had not been so gallantly upborne by his son. But the strain has left its mark on that son, and her compassion migrates for a moment from herself to him.

"I think you are almost as glad as I am that it is over."

"Quite." A moment later, "I wish we could have made you more comfortable."

It is the identical aspiration which, issuing from his father's mouth, had been treated with the disdain its futility seemed to merit. Coming from the son's it is differently treated, though it never occurs to her to deny the discomfort which he deplures.

"You, at least, have nothing to reproach your-

self with. You have done your best to make it easier for me."

"By making you shed bitter tears? Is that your idea of hospitality?"

"You were quite right. I—I *had* been very near hating Marie." As she makes the admission her head sinks till her round chin almost touches the entwined diamond initials of Jim's bridesmaid locket upon her neck. "I have to thank you for opening my eyes to the fact."

"Mine has been a graceful, pleasing task. If I did not know to the contrary, I should feel sure that your thanks must be ironical."

"I am never ironical; I suppose that I am too matter-of-fact."

"Matter-of-fact!" he repeats slowly, not because he doubts the statement, which, indeed, he does not, but from an inward wonder why the flat quality in question suddenly appears to him as dressed in Venus' cestus?

She takes his repetition as doubt, and brings authority to back her.

"I have often been told, and by a person who ought to and does know me intimately, that I am wanting in imagination."

"Might I ask whether that person is a man or a woman?"

"A—man."

The slight hesitation is not lost upon him, nor a patent desire to get away from the subject which she herself introduced.

"I should not have been easy in my mind if I had not had the opportunity of thanking you before I left, and I want to tell you, too, that you

must not be unhappy about your sister, because even if I go on hating her, it will not spoil her life, since I am not to live with her."

"Won't it spoil yours?"

The dejection of her answer is tinged with surprise that this aspect of the case should have presented itself to Marie's brother.

"If it does, that will not affect her!"

He knows that it would be absurd to rejoin that her happiness or unhappiness will affect him; yet the words that would tell her so drive away all others from his lips, and force him to silence. He can only stupidly wonder for how much longer he will have her standing there before him under the electric light, whose ill-shaded blinding inquisitiveness fails to detect any minutest flaw in the grain of her skin, the fresh tincture of her lips, or the nice perfection of her appointments. She has given him a peep into a world of ordered beauty and refinement which he looks in at with an exile's longing. He must say something—anything to detain her a few moments longer.

"You have made your plans?"

"Not yet—not finally. They depend upon another—upon other people."

"The people who think you wanting in imagination?"

This time she reddens frankly, and he realizes the full intrusion upon her confidence of his question—realizes, too, once again what her sliding from compromising singular to colourless plural means.

"I must really be going," she says, with a hurried glance at a clock above their heads, which,

being a Kergouet one, is, of course, not going; "and in case I do not see you again in this crowd, I will bid you good-bye."

To tell her how little likelihood there is of the contingency she suggests would be to forfeit present possession of the hand which, less small and soft than Marie's, but long and fair and capable, lies next moment in his.

"Thank you for having tried to make it easier for me."

"Easier!" he repeats, with a sharp memory of her tears.

"Yes, easier, though you did make me cry."

Coquetry is not in her, and in any case she would not deign to coquet with such as he, yet there is a half-malicious sweetness leavening the sadness of her smile. He holds her hand since she has given it to him firmly, though with no impertinent pressure.

"Good-bye," he says; then resolutely, and as if defying her to contradict him, "In other circumstances we should have been friends."

CHAPTER IX

"I DARE say you will be at home as soon as we!" These parting words of her brother's, spoken in ignorance of her intention of forsaking him, have rung ironically in Lettice's ears; yet they come nearly true. Christmas is spent by the bride-pair in Paris, and the first night of Esmeralda's play has delayed them yet a day or two in London, but early January is to find them at Trent.

A slightly malicious smile touches Lettice's lips as she reads the cast of the new play at the Popularity, which reveals the fact that Miss Tiny Villiers is as yet unscathed by influenza; but it is impossible to feel very ill-natured about poor Esmeralda, and the fact does not elate the reader as much as she would have thought that any misfortune to a Kergouet must have done.

The cousins with whom she spends her own Christmas and New Year, though a pleasant, affectionate family, jar upon her feelings by persisting in regarding her brother's marriage as a very good thing for her.

"It was the only thing that could have freed you," says her aunt, looking sensibly at her through the spectacles that her acute eyes do not seem to need; "and poor Jim was growing very heavy and droney. I never thought, after the Yankee catastrophe, that he would have binged himself up to

ask any other woman. Perhaps this little minx saved him the trouble. She looked quite capable of taking the initiative."

The matron laughs, with an inward thanksgiving that the minx in question had not run across anything male among her own brood before inflaming the ponderous Jim. Her niece answers gravely—

"No, I do not think she did."

It is the idlest Christmas Miss Trent has ever spent, and the sight of her relatives, cheerfully bustling about their seasonable charities, brings to her with added sting the fact that never again will she play Protagonist in like bounties and festivities at her late home.

Her brother sends her a handsome Christmas present and a letter, through every line of which strong affection breathes wherever blazing happiness lets it show its nose. It ends with an erased postscript. To reconstruct what its builder has meant to destroy is certainly a mistake; but a suspicion that the P. S. is in her new sister-in-law's handwriting lends Miss Trent the fatal ingenuity necessary to decipher what must have run thus—

"Our minds are braced to finding you on the doorstep."

The first outcome of her discovery is a red vow never to cross the doorstep alluded to; but time, coupled with the reflection that the sentence had been erased, and must have originally done duty for a pleasantry, make her modify this resolve. It is incumbent on her to go back to Trent in order to give up into the worthless hands which will henceforth hold them the reins of her own dear kingdom; to give Marie the opportunity, of which

she is sure not to avail herself, of acquitting those duties to village, parish, schools and neighbours which she is certain to neglect. It shall, at all events, not be for want of having them faithfully pointed out to her.

"I would go back for the present," says the sensible aunt. "But give them a little holiday now and then; visit a good deal, but make it your headquarters. I do not quite see what else is open to you; nothing short of a miracle would turn you into a club-and-flat girl, and if you and that pretty little flyaway can't hit it off, why, you must marry."

"The refuge of the hopelessly commonplace and antiquated! Must I?" replies the girl, with a smile that is both sad and dry.

Must she? It is the answer to that question which is still further enhancing the difficulty of the question of her reappearance.

There is one welcome awaiting her of whose warmth and sincerity she cannot doubt. Did ever man write, or woman receive, such a letter as that with which the curate of Trent has poured the Niagara volume of his love and triumph on receiving the news of her brother's engagement? It is so blazing that she is afraid to come near it, and has locked it into her despatch-box with a dread lest, if she admits its closer proximity, it may set fire to her too. The dread is mixed with the same tingling curiosity as the sight of his ardours had inspired; the same half-frightened, half-delighted wonder as to whether his tempestuous conviction that, if she will let him, he can infect her with a like fury of tenderness be true?

The dread and the fascination have been hers

ever since Chevening's command to her to answer his adoration had broken upon her startled maiden ear; but do they keep quite the same relative proportion as before? Is not the dread rather more, and the fascination rather less, than at first? And if so, why?

She fails totally to answer these questions, her thoughts getting so hopelessly mixed that when she tries to solve them the words, "In happier circumstances we should have been friends," keep chiming senselessly in her ear instead.

She has not answered the letter. How dares she, indeed? The least chilling phrase might drive him to God knows what extremes of despair—suicide, perhaps; for with all his gifts his is not a quite well-balanced mind. Does she even wish to chill him?

She glances half timidly through the six volcanic pages. Oh, how humble and awed she ought to be at possessing such a love! Many women set forth on their life journey fain to be content with a little tepid, uncertain liking. How royally endowed she has it in her power to start on the race! Even if she can't glow with a heat that adequately answers his—but can't she? A thrill seems to contradict the inability. She must see him, hear him, touch him, like the blind patriarch in the Bible story, before she can decide whether he is in very truth the love of her life or no.

And so it comes to pass that an early day in January finds her driving through the lodge-gates of her old home under the evergreen arches and not yet dismounted "Welcomes" and "Health and happiness," which rub into her the fact that the new *régime* has begun.

After all, it is the old *régime* in the shape of her brother, and her brother alone, who meets her on the doorstep, escorts her into the empty morning-room, and makes her pour out her own tea.

"Marie is in the music-room. They cannot have let her know. I'll go and tell her."

"Wait a moment. Do not be in a hurry. I want to have a look at you. I want to see if you are still Jim."

He answers gracefully, "Rot!" but lets her stand opposite him, with a hand on each of his shoulders, and answers with a look of unflinching happiness her suspicious gaze.

"Well, may I go now?"

"Yes."

Left alone, her eye hurries round the room in search of change and deterioration. To a casual eye there would not seem to be much of either, the trivial blots of some large-framed photographs of Miss Poppy Delafield in character excepted; but in a second the room's lifelong occupant has detected one which makes her start violently. What that change is does not remain uncertain for one minute after the return of Mr. Trent, apologetic and wifeless.

"Oh, Jim, how *could* you allow it?"

"Allow what?"

"The chairs."

Mr. Trent's look follows with a disturbed expression his sister's, which is resting tragically upon the two sacred, comfortable, but not handsome arm-chairs, which, occupied in life by their parents, had since their deaths never been moved one hair-breadth from their respective positions near the

fireplace, but now, disgraced and banished, are standing far off with their backs against the wall. His voice in answering is guilty and troubled.

"She did not know. She had not an idea."

"And you did not tell her?"

"I did not like to, not just at the first—at the first moment."

"I wonder she did not know by instinct."

"What didn't I know by instinct?" cries a light piercing voice, and the culprit stands between them.

There is an ominous silence, during which Lettice takes in that her adversary, Frenchily tea-gowned and chillily smothered about the throat in white fur, is prettier than ever. The bride repeats her question.

"What didn't I know by instinct?"—looking insistently from one to the other. "It is the only way that I ever do know anything."

"It is nothing—nothing," begins Mr. Trent, in an apprehensive hurry quite new to him; but his sister has no intention of letting the crisis be slidden over on rollers. With one direct thrust she is at the heart of the matter.

"We were talking about the *chairs*."

"What chairs?"

"I was remarking to Jim that they had been moved."

"Why shouldn't they be moved?"

The eyes of both speakers are directed to the spots whence the two rather lumbering articles of furniture had been removed, and replaced by more prepossessing specimens of the cabinet-maker's art.

Miss Trent rears her stature till she looks like a block of pink ice.

"It is only that they were my father's and mother's, and had not been moved since their deaths."

A flood of crimson drowns the beautifully apportioned red and Devonshire-cream white of Marie's little face, and seems as if it would even tinge her snowy furs.

"Your father's and mother's! Why on earth did not you tell me, Jim? How could you have let me? It is quite true, I ought to have known by instinct."

Before they guess what she is going to do, she has raced to the distant wall, and begun with all her small strength to tug at one of the banished relics, and set its casters rolling towards its native seat.

Jim bounds after her, with an agility as new as his late flurried attempt at a laudable lie.

"Do not—do not! You will strain yourself. Let me."

But she throws away his help and his hand. "You ought to have told me," she says in a choked voice, piloting her charge in angry independence to its goal; and having insisted on performing a like unassisted act of reparation towards its fellow, she flies stormily out of the room.

"I knew that she would only need to be told," says Lettice, perhaps a little aghast at the perfect success that has attended her exhibition of candour.

Her brother's sole reply is to give her one look of a quality distinctly different from any he has ever

let fall upon her in all her twenty-two years, after which he follows his wife from the room.

The Manes of the late Mr. and Mrs. Trent have been magnificently appeased, but it is open to question whether they themselves might not have thought that the sacrifice had been accomplished at a somewhat heavy cost. It can scarcely be considered a good beginning.

However, dinner may be said to pass off pretty well, since it is not very obvious that Marie has been crying, and the appearance of Kirstie in a muzzle causes but a slight hitch in the general amiability; a hasty explanation from Mr. Trent that the measure is only a temporary one, rendered necessary by the determination of that young lady to *do for* Marie's tottering old Lulu, which had belonged to "dear mother," at once smooths the rising billows. Possibly Lettice feels that she has conquered enough for one day, and that to except against any form of filial piety would sit ill upon her at the present moment.

The January Sunday morning that follows dawns lately bright, and some of its gilding seems to have rubbed off on the Trent family. From the manly simplicity of Jim's mind little affronts fall away, unable to find a sticking-place, and there is not a trace of resentment in his talk with his sister over their *tête-à-tête* breakfast. Marie has from the first scoffed away any idea of appearing with hideous punctuality and impossible earliness at nine o'clock."

Far from any huffy avoidance of his wife's name, Mr. Trent's conversation runs mainly upon her anxiety to make friends with everybody; upon the

invaluable quality of Lettice's help to her in this direction, etc.

Lettice listens, half remorseful, half ashamed, yet wholly hostile.

When the tardy bride at last comes upon the scene, it appears that she has a slight cold; and her husband urges her, with tender importunity, not to risk worsening it by going to church. She lightly flicks away his beseechments.

"Not go to church on my first Sunday! Not sit, for the first time in my life, in a pew at the top of the church? Is it likely? Not see the rector and hear the curate? Is that likely?"

There is a flash of malice and mirth in her eye as she pronounces her last two aspirations; and a trickle of cold water seems to steal down Miss Trent's back. Jim has told Marie! Men always prove their devotion to new wives by sacrificing old secrets—other people's no less than, or instead of, their own, to them! But Jim answers matter-of-factly—

"You will not hear the curate; he does not preach in the morning."

"Well, hear the vicar and see the curate, then. That will do just as well."

It is in horrible trepidation—heart-sinkings curiously linked with heart-leapings—that Lettice treads the familiar path to church. Outwardly sedate but inwardly trembling, she walks along a little ahead of the other two, conning over to herself topics of reassurance to still her pulses. At all events, he who is making them throb will not be beetling above her in the dreadful proximity of the pulpit. The vicar cannot have a second mother to

force, by injudiciously timed dying, his curate into the preacher's place. To hear the devout music of Chevening's voice in the Liturgy must be wholly pleasure; and she will be able to listen to Mr. Taylor's platitudes with the lenient affection bred of lifelong knowledge how well he lives up to them. Add to which, the congregation will have none of its usual attention to spare for herself, every eye being inevitably bent on the bride.

The latter is full of alert interest as she skips along, showering questions and comments, all curiously towny and un-rural, upon her spouse, who is so much occupied in answering, in fruitlessly begging her not to let her gown trail, and in taking care of her unnecessarily florid books of devotion, as, for the first time in his life, to forget to relieve his sister of her modest Prayer-book and Hymnal.

Even a dowdy bride may count upon being looked at once in her life, and no one has ever yet found it possible to help staring at Marie, whether in wonder, admiration, or wrath. It is therefore no marvel that as the new-comer trips up the aisle in an extravagantly becoming toque, casting dazzling glances of half-smiling, if not very suitable curiosity on this side and that, there is a very audible rustle and shifting of positions among the Trent flock. Even the lady whom nobody visits casts a look from between her pariah eyelashes; and the three discreet old gentlewomen make scarcely disguised play with their elbows on each others' ribs.

The clergy have entered, and the service has begun. Thank Heaven, Mr. Taylor's mother has not died again, for here he is in his place. Even Mrs.

Taylor has shaken off dull headache, and is sitting quiet and *recueillie*, but deeply excited, in the Vicarage pew.

These facts Miss Trent has mastered by intuition, since she never once lifts her eyes from her book. Here, in God's House, Chevening must and shall be to her only God's minister; nor shall any eye-straying of hers tempt him to one of those glances whose passion has no place here. She keeps her resolve rigidly; but the bride is evidently less severe, and the problem of keeping at bay her whispered questions is only solved by a feigned deafness. Her husband has not the heart for such austerity, and her little hissing queries keep dropping into his ear throughout the service.

It is over now, and they are in the churchyard, which is fuller than usual, both from a disposition in the congregation to hang back and have a look, and also because Marie has at once overridden and trampled down the immemorial Trent custom of remaining in the church till the last, and passing out in unhampered dignity, as a gloss upon the truism that we are all equal in the sight of God.

Marie is in the thick of the people at once, panting *Jim* toiling after her in vain with his presentations and slow smiles. She is shaking hands with persons who have never hitherto got anything but a bow, making jokes with people who have never received anything beyond a formal "Fine day," dancing upon custom, driving her coach through tradition, rioting in revolution.

She is retrieved at last—she and her toque—from among the gaping little crowd, who will have to go home and lengthily ruminate over their Sun-

day dinners before they can hope, even approximately, to classify such a phenomenon. The Trent family meanwhile take their homeward way.

"I hope you will not mind," says Jim, in a half-apologetic voice to his wife, "but Chevening—that is the curate, the man who read the service—has always been in the habit of lunching with us on Sunday, and he will very likely turn up to-day. You will not mind?"

"*Mind!* I shall be cruelly disappointed if he does not."

Lettice is, as before, stalking ahead, but her tingling ears inform her too truly of the mischievous ring in her sister-in-law's words.

"Oh, that is all right," rejoins Jim, relieved; adding, with his unwonted heavy liveliness, "You were quite bowled over, were you?"

She gives one of her high laughs. "Who could refuse anything to a man with such a nose?"

Jim laughs, but the stalker ahead's comment is, "What bad taste! What an odious pleasantry!" She does not feel her brother's certainty that Randal will appear at luncheon. Will he dare trust himself to meet her in the presence of a stranger, even though he does not share the knowledge which produces in herself so overpowering a shyness, that Marie knows; that the cold glitter of Marie's eyes will be upon them, detecting each tremor, spying out each frailty?

The terror that her own undependable face will betray quivers of expectation or a drop of disappointment keeps her mewed up in her sitting-room—the sitting-room which Mrs. Trent has as yet shown no signs of reiving from her—till long after

the gong has sounded. The family are already sitting at the round table, and one of the three persons present leaves his roast beef to get up and shake hands with her. He has come, and it is over!

The conversation at once resumes the track her entrance had interrupted. Marie is pouring a shower of questions over the visitor upon the names, habits, and histories of the congregation; the position in church and personal characteristics of each of whom she is describing with an accuracy that does more credit to her powers of observation than her devotion. Chevening is answering her more rationally and collectedly than under the circumstances Lettice could have hoped. After an electric glance at herself—please Heaven, Marie did not intercept it—he resumes his share in the lively catechism. Lettice recovers her own composure enough to verify the daring incautiousness—nay, the perfect recklessness—of her sister-in-law's queries and comments.

"And who was the tiny lady in one of the side aisles in a pew by herself, sitting next a pillar—she looked as if she was trying to hide behind it—dressed in black, with a pretty little dismal face, and who never lifted her eyes?"

Randal's answer is not glib this time. "I think you must mean Mrs. Fairfax."

"Fairfax! Oh! Is she a widow?"

"No, but her husband never comes to church."

"I liked her looks. Why wasn't I introduced to her?"

The sharp click of the bride's question meets only empty air. Then Randal replies lamely—

"She had probably got out of church before you."

It would have been wise to leave the explanation thus, but some latent exasperation of Miss Trent's makes her improve upon it.

"Even if she had not, you would not have been introduced to her."

"Why?"

She looks round in vain upon three diversely uncomfortable faces, and her "Why?" has to be repeated again and more clarion-wise before Jim is understood to mumble to his plate the explanation that there is "a screw loose!"

CHAPTER X

A SCREW loose! To the relief of all parties and the astonishment of one, Mrs. Trent does not immediately pursue the theme; but she recurs to it after luncheon, when she and Lettice are alone together for a few minutes in the morning-room.

"What was the screw loose about that poor little woman?"

"Oh, the usual one."

"There are so many usual ones."

Lettice hesitates. She has no great dislike to the idea of hurting her sister-in-law's feelings in small things, but wittingly to remind her of her hereditary disgrace is far beyond the scope of her malevolence.

"Do you think there is any use in digging up an old scandal?"

"Perhaps I shall not think it a scandal."

This schismatic utterance gives Lettice's tongue the needed impetus.

"She lived with her husband before she married him."

"Perhaps he had a wife already."

"I believe he had."

"Then how *could* this one marry him?"

The topsy-turvy morality evidenced by this question puts a good lump of ice into Miss Trent's next tone.

"His wife naturally divorced him, and the person who interests you became Mrs. Fairfax."

"And has she run quite straight ever since?"

"As far as I know. She lives very quietly, and"—rather grudgingly—"is extremely charitable to the poor."

"How long ago did it happen?"

"I really forget; eight or ten years."

Mrs. Trent takes a cigarette from a silver box near her, adorned with a too-much flourished monogram, and which Lettice has already recognized as one of the objectionable wedding presents from the distaff side, and, striking a match with a vicious little scratch, as if she wished it were on her sister-in-law's head, lights it.

"And you none of you go near her?" she says in a voice which for her is low.

"She is, naturally, not visited."

Marie leans her head as far back as it will go over the cushioned chair—not one of the sacred ones—on which she is sitting, and gives a kick at some imaginary object with one little swinging foot. Then she sits up straight, and war is in her great dark eyes.

"I dare say she is worth the whole Pharisaical lot put together. I shall go and call on her tomorrow."

But here the roof of Trent Manor is providentially saved from being blown off by the entrance of the two men.

"We have been quarrelling!" cries Marie, jumping up, and making a raid upon Jim. "Come into the conservatory, and I will tell you my version of it. We have not had time, you say? Oh yes, we have. We began at once."

In a moment she has whirled him off through

the glass doors, and in among the blossoming camellias and Roman hyacinths.

The moment so trepidatingly expected has come. The clergyman stands for quite a minute or two watching the disappearing figures—presumably to be sure that they are safely out of hearing—before he joins Miss Trent at the fire, where, to give herself a countenance, she is picking up little hot coals with a tiny pair of tongs, and dropping them into the fire. If the lover's approach seemed a little delayed, he makes up for lost time. Tongs, fingers, and all, are at once appropriated by him.

“Who was right?”

The attack is so unexpected in its taking-for-grantedness that for a moment she acquiesces in it. It is only when something in the young man's face tells her that his audacities may not end where they have begun, that she recovers herself enough to resist.

In the effort to be free without any unladylike scuffling, the tongs escape, and fall into the fender with a clatter disproportioned to their small elegance. The noise, and the prosaic stooping to pick them up, set things on a better footing. She can answer his question from a rational distance, and in an almost rational voice.

“Right in what?”

“In the faith in a brother's celibacy.”

The triumph of his smile jars upon her, and her answering words let the feeling pierce through them.

“Do you think there is ever any use in told-you-so-ing?”

“My landlady must have thought I had gone

mad when I heard the news. I was in dreary sea-side lodgings where Taylor had sent me, because he saw I was going to break down. You had absolutely unnerved me!"

There is such a quiver of reproach in his voice—she had forgotten the full beauty of that organ—coupled with such a jubilant implication that his sufferings are all in the past, that a terrified wish to put off the inevitable coming to close quarters seizes the girl.

"It was a very great—a very painful surprise to me."

"*Painful!*" he repeats, with a wounded intonation—*painful* to get the order of release! You can hardly expect me to sympathize with you there." Then, seeing that no answering light comes into her troubled face, he adds in a lighter key, and with a meaning glance towards the conservatory door, "One must allow that there were extenuating circumstances."

"If he had meant his remark to lift his love's dropped lids, he is quite successful."

"Do you mean my sister-in-law's good looks?"

There is no mistaking the accent used, and a transient flash of amusement qualifies the amorous seriousness of Chevening's face.

"Well, yes, I imagine people might think her pretty—people who had eyes to spare to look at her."

The inference that the present speaker is not provided with those conveniences is so obvious that Miss Trent hurries to say with mollified magnanimity—

“ ‘ Pretty ’ expresses her most inadequately. She is extremely beautiful in her style.”

The magnanimity would have been more complete without the last clause; but even as it stands the tribute is a very respectable one.

“ Do you think that I came here to-day to discuss her? ”

There is a directness of purpose in his tone, which only intensifies her desire to stave off the crisis.

“ I dare say that you had a little curiosity to see what the person was like who had dethroned your old friend.”

“ *Dethroned!* Is it possible that that is the way in which you look at it? ”

There is in his tone such a lofty contempt for the advantages he has *not* lost, that she despises herself for having alluded to them; and mortification and trouble combine to drive a drop of water into the corner of each eye.

“ What other way is there of looking at it? I *am* dethroned.”

He does not answer for the moment, except by a diminution of distance between them; but she feels, with an only half-dismayed excitement, that her tears have quickened the pace.

“ Why didn’t you answer my letter? ”

There is no sound in response, except that of the parrot in the distance, practising his most realistic accomplishment, a loose cough.

“ Why didn’t you? ”

She thinks he is going to take her hands again, and puts them behind her.

“ Why didn’t you? ”

How oppressive the furnace lit in his eyes is, and this passionate monotony of repetition! She must answer.

"I have not your faculty of expression, and I did not know what to write."

There is a second of misery and menace in his look; then the sun breaks out again with redoubled power.

"You thought you could do it better face to face."

As she neither yeas nor nays this explanation, he goes on exultantly—

"That is the interpretation that I have been putting upon it—that you meant me to put upon it, didn't you? Dare I tell you *how* I thought you would answer me?"

He has brought all his artillery to bear upon her, adding that proximity which has often set fire to the hitherto unsuspected tinder in many a heart.

She had wished ardently to see, to hear, to touch him—it is not his fault that she has not had more of the latter experience—in order to be sure that this is indeed for her, as so undoubtedly for him, the one master feeling of a lifetime; but now that she has done all three she is quite as unsure as ever. In the whirling uncertainty of her sensations there is only one fixed thought: "If I were quite sure, what heaven it would be!" To this thought comes added, as an unworthy rider, the recollection of Marie's tasteless jest: "It would be impossible to refuse anything to a man with such a nose."

The fiery whisper in which Randal repeats his question, "Dare I tell you?" plainly shows that he will very shortly answer his own question in the

affirmative, unless she takes stringent measures to prevent him.

She steps back a pace on to Kirstie, who is trying to rub off her imposed muzzle against the fender-bars, and says curtly—

“No, do not.”

Then, with a new reaction, at sight of the ireful beauty of her lover's face, and the consciousness of her own racing blood, thinking in a kind of hot terror, “It may be the real thing, after all! I may be throwing away the real thing, after all!” she recalls, and contradicts her first answer.

“Yes, do, if you wish.”

A few moments later she is staggering away from him. He has kissed her violently, and she has kissed him back. It must be the real thing, or she will never be able to bear to think of herself again.

Anti-climax follows rapidly. The innocent Kirstie, too young to understand the situation, and mistaking the phenomena of love, which is itself a species of war, for that vulgarer kind with which she is better acquainted, anxious to join the *mêlée*, gets her nose out sideways through her muzzle, and makes for the clergyman's heels. The clamour with which she accompanies this action brings the host and hostess back out of the conservatory.

“What has happened to that little fiend?” cries Marie's piercing treble. “Oh, she has got her muzzle off! Jim, for Heaven's sake, pick up Lulu!”

Jim obeys; and in the little excitement that follows, the picking up of the doddering old relic of “dear mamma” into the harbour of Jim's arms, whence she shows the place where her teeth once were at Miss Kirstie, who, standing on her stout

Scotch hind legs, with her forepaws propped against Mr. Trent's shins, shouts her battle-cry upwards, and the final ejection of Miss Kirstie from her own morning-room ought to give the two actors in the preceding drama time to recover themselves.

"She really is not fit to be at liberty," cries the bride, with lightening eyes. Then, turning to Chevening, "Just feel how this poor old thing's heart is beating. Did she succeed in biting a piece out of you?"

Miss Trent's brain and senses are still beating and whirling, and it would be impossible to her to look at the person addressed. But her buzzing ears listen with confidence for his answer. He will not give poor Miss Kirstie away for her faithful, if erroneous, championship of the woman who has just made him the enormous sacrifice of the first kiss of her life. With what words of delicate incisiveness, mixed with occult hints of fervid gratitude, which only she can understand, will he rebuke the interloper for her insolence and incivility? She has not long to wait, but she can hardly believe in the sentence which comes wafted on an angry laugh.

"Little brute! It is not her fault if she did not."

"Did she go for you quite unprovoked?" pursues the bride, with heated interest. "What had you done to provoke her?"

The query is a natural one under the circumstances; but this time Chevening's answer is not ready.

Lettice shoots a look of agonized appeal at her fellow criminal, which she at once withdraws, hav-

ing only mastered the dreadful fact that a hair of her own is flagrantly sticking on the shoulder of his coat! Has Marie seen it? Was there a lurid meaning in her apparently harmless question? She peeps hurriedly at Mrs. Trent, but her eye's theft brings no satisfaction with it. Marie has always that horrid sparkle about her! Whether or no it is intensified at this moment, poor Miss Trent is quite unable to decide. She makes a bewildered calculation as to how near the conservatory doors the interrupters must have been when The Event was happening. Very, very near, undoubtedly, and yet, if—oh, horror of horrors!—they had seen, Jim would never be speaking as he is in his level, placid, everyday voice.

"Aberdeen terriers are always rather short in the temper!"

It is his contribution of oil to the waves; and his sister draws a relieved inference from it. She has nothing further to upset her through the brief remnant of Randal's visit, during which he shields her from notice by devoting himself entirely to Marie and Lulu, asking the latter's age, and falsely admiring her breeding and manners.

It is only when the visitor is gone, and Jim has walked a few frosty paces of homeward way with him, leaving the sisters-in-law alone together, that a new and awful bolt falls and splits Lettice's head.

"It is a beautiful nose!" says Marie, cavalierly, but without repeating her objectionable sentiment, "and if I had not such a cold I should certainly go to hear him hold forth to-night. I have a real servant's taste for evening church. But he deserves to be better valeted. His landlady should not send

him out with long hairs on his coat-sleeve." Having said it, she goes out of the room liltng.

* * * * *

It is upon an absolutely transmogrified world that Miss Trent's eyes—late in closing—open next morning. The change is not in the face of nature, for the frost still holds, and from her bed she can see its evidence written large on the cold red east, on the iron trees and the mournful rooks.

It is within herself that the prodigious metamorphosis is wrought. Yesterday, as she lay here, at the same hour, looking out at the same phenomena, she was *herself*, her own. To-day! Well, it is the real thing! Never again must she allow the possibility that it is not to cross her mind. It must be! If it had not been, is it conceivable that she—she of all people (he had told her that she was made of snow, comes in soothing parenthesis)—should have, of her own accord—— Yes, that is what makes it so irrevocable, it was of her own accord. Well, there is nothing now left for her, no shattering uncertainties or tormenting doubts, nothing but to enter in and take possession of the kingdom of heaven, whose key her own hand has turned.

With thoughts so radiantly coloured as she tells herself hers are, it is surprising that her maid on calling her asks whether she has a headache.

At breakfast the illusion might be possible to Miss Trent that the old *régime* still exists—the two places laid; the emancipated and royally disobedient Kirstie continually returning to the forbidden ecstasy of routing through the shut window the colony of expectant birds outside, and having her

sin repeatedly condoned by the weak-minded pair inside. Yet there is a difference. Formerly the brother and sister had never heeded whether they were talking or not, in the reliant certainty of complete understanding, whether mute or vocal. Now there is a slight tendency towards making polite conversation for each other; but it is not very marked. There is in Jim's manner—to his trepidating sister's acute relief—no evidence that Marie has imparted to him the discovery made by her terrible eyes, and the catering for the birds is an immense help.

Through the winter and far into the spring, when they become picksome and dainty, the winged singers are liberally entertained at Trent; and the word must have gone about among them that it is so, for they now daily crowd the terrace walk in unscrupulous multitudes, pathetically hunger-tamed, flying on little weakened pinions, and yet with spirit enough left to peck and snub and eject each other as occasion offers.

In holding back the struggling, straining Kirstie from raiding them when the window is opened, in pointing out to each other the new arrivals, in counting the blue-tits standing on their heads inside the cocoa-nut, the finches pecking the suspended lard, and the thirsty thrushes drinking out of the earthen pans, brother and sister are themselves again. It is not Jim's fault that they do not part without a slight jar, which begins by a polite inquiry from Lettice as to the state of her sister-in-law's cold.

"It is decidedly better. Why do not you go up and see her?"

"Do not you think that every Englishwoman's bedroom is her castle? We might quarrel so early in the morning"—laughing, not quite pleasantly. "By-the-by, as she told you her version of our dispute yesterday, I suppose I ought to tell you mine."

"She never told me any version," replies Jim, sighing wearily. "She never mentioned it or you."

The implication that they had been occupied with pleasanter topics than herself, though unintended, galls Miss Trent so much as to drown the remorse she would otherwise have felt at having been so manifestly outdone in magnanimity.

"Marie announced her intention of calling on Mrs. Fairfax."

"Well?"

"Well!" Seeing an unwonted danger-signal in Jim's slow eye, she adds, "Of course she does not know the *carte-du-pays*—what is possible and impossible here. Just conceive what our mother's feelings would have been at such a suggestion!"

There is a moment's silence, during which the thought may have crossed Jim's unimaginative mind that there *are* advantages attached to being a foundling. Then he says—

"If no one did anything but what their parents had done before them, the world would not get on much."

It is a truism of the purest dye, and uttered with commendable temper, but to his sister it seems as if the red flag of anarchy were waving in blood before her eyes. But even her sister-in-law's iniquities recede into the background of her mind, whence they had been only momentarily drawn, annihilated by the overwhelming interest of her own affairs.

Randal will, of course, be here almost before she can draw breath to ask Jim for her. He may arrive at any moment. With his headlong passion and the weapon she herself has put into his hand he will expect to carry all before him. What may be the effect of any obstacle put in the floodtide of such a torrent she dares not speculate.

And Jim? Since his first contemptuous reception of the news of Chevening's declaration, on the evening when he had announced his own marriage, the subject seems to have passed absolutely from his mind. Marie is, no doubt, the sponge that has wiped it away, as she has wiped all else. He has seen, with apparent oblivion of any reason for a difference, the reappearance of the curate at the Sunday luncheon-table, nor did his face afterwards show the least consciousness of anything abnormal in the appearance of the two countenances so guiltily conscious of their recent juxtaposition. Is it possible that he can have utterly forgotten?

There is profound mortification in the thought that it may be so; and yet the alternative, that a wish to be rid of her may have reconciled him to the prospect, is not much more comforting. To be given up with reluctant blessings and regrets to her lover is the boon to which, of all others, she must now most aspire, but against being thrown into his arms as into a waste-paper basket heart and spirit revolt. Will it be better to prepare Jim a little?

Recalling that she has already succeeded in ruffling him, and realizing that in her present state of high tension any repetition of the ridicule with which he had received her former announcement

would be more than she could bear, she decides to wait quietly for what will happen. But to wait quietly—that is just what on trial seems most impossible.

She goes to her own sitting-room, the room over her retention of which she has kept what so far seems an unnecessarily bristling watch. The windows command the park and the path by which the expected one will approach.

In a half-fascinated fear of seeing him too soon, she turns resolutely away. The room is crowded with relics of her departed parent. It had been her mother's, and in the first irrational devotion of her grief she had resolved that nothing in it should ever be changed. It has been impossible to adhere quite literally to this determination. Time and new tastes have made creeping encroachments; an extra bookcase has been needed to contain the books recommended, and in some cases given, by Randal, but the character of the room is unaltered. The bureau is the same one whose drawers and pigeon-holes have since her earliest childhood been filled with the accounts, records, and documents of the numerous local charities founded or supported by the late Mrs. Trent. She sits down at it, casting her eyes with a melancholy pride over the neatly docketed and admirably arranged files. How well she has carried out the charge that had devolved upon her!

Perhaps it will be wise to glance in final survey over the receipts, cheque-books, etc., before giving them up into the hands—how woefully incompetent!—of her successor. She carries out her intention conscientiously, though unable to prevent

her thoughts fluttering agitatedly away from benefit clubs and mothers' guilds, or to check the palpitating listening for a door-bell which could not possibly be audible.

Now and again, as evidences of her own method and order meet her eye, the thought comes streaked with satisfaction of what an admirable clergyman's wife she will make.

A clergyman's wife! A clergyman! There is something ludicrously incongruous between the two phrases and her latest memory of him. What was there of the spiritual guide and the earnest disciple in that mad embrace?

The answer comes clothed in scarlet, and her forehead falls forward on a sheaf of Friendly Girls. But she raises it presently, shaking off the virgin shame that oppresses her. If it is the real thing, as it *is*, as it *is*, as it *is*, there is nothing to blush for.

He has told her that his is not one of the exalted natures that can do without the prop of human love, that lacking it, soul and intellect starve and perish. Well, he shall have it. Having once given, there shall be no niggardly doling out of her gift. He shall have "full measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over."

She has plenty of time to plan her liberality, plenty of time for her heart to glow and unglow again, for the morning passes and nothing happens.

CHAPTER XI

By luncheon-time Miss Trent is in an unenviable state of mind, but of the many hypotheses she has started to account for the unaccountable, one has ousted the others, namely, that he has been contemptuously dismissed by Jim, without any reference to herself.

The idea fills her with blazing indignation, and she has to take herself well in hand before she can respond, with tolerable calm, to the gong's admirably punctual summons.

Jim is already in his place, and there is no sign of guilt or agitation in his contented face and even voice.

"Marie says we are not to wait for her."

It is a formula that both of them are destined to become well acquainted with, and ultimately to dispense with as superfluous.

When luncheon is half over the mistress of the house saunters in, but even then does not sit down in her place, but strolls round the table, picking a grape here, cutting herself a slice of chocolate cake there. She ends by setting Lulu upon the tablecloth, and inviting her to walk across it to Jim.

The old dog, who in her day has been a beauty and a Japanese spaniel, accomplishes this feat in time, with only the two casualties of an upset water-bottle and a broken flower-glass.

The performance is witnessed with an ire too deep for barks by Miss Kirstie, who, seated on her high chair, whence she is not allowed to extend even a paw towards the board, testifies in short muzzled howls against this disgraceful instance of nepotism.

As far as inclination goes, her mistress could bark too. She relieves her feelings by quoting imaginary remarks made by Kirstie upon favouritism, interlopers, etc.

Marie rejoins, with improbably smart repartees, attributed to the tottering Lulu.

Mrs. Trent gets so much the best of it in this amiable game, that Kirstie's guns are soon silenced.

Whether pleased at her own success, or in concession to a distressed wrinkle in her husband's brow, Marie ceases to be Lulu's mouth-piece, and addresses a civil question to her sister-in-law.

"Has she been out this morning?"

"No, she has not."

The other expresses polite surprise. "I thought that you were such an out-of-door person—Jim has always held you up to me as an example—that you never could stay indoors in any weather."

Miss Trent winces. Does that hateful sparkle and curiosity mean more than appears?

"I was busy"—adding, in elucidation, and with a pale hope of being disagreeable—"busy looking over the accounts of the societies I have managed, before giving them over to you."

She is successful. For a minute Marie looks discomfited, but cannot, in the end, be said to be worsted, though her rejoinder is smilingly addressed to Jim.

"You kept the 'societies' dark! If you had mentioned them you knew that I should have shown you the door!"

Her delicate features resume their serenity. Already she has learnt that nothing stirs her sister-in-law to such blind dumb wrath as the implication that there ever was, or could be, any doubt as to her own alacrity in accepting Mr. Trent. She has eaten hardly any luncheon; but she strolls, pleased, out of the dining-room, feeling that she has "scored."

A little later, Lettice, restlessly walking about the morning-room, overhears, through the open door, a dialogue between the wedded pair, who have apparently come into the hall.

"Have you finished your letters?"

"Yes."

"What a budget!"

There is no objectionable lilt in the voice that answers—

"How should I live if I did not write to them?"

The rejoinder has a note of distress. "You miss them as badly as you expected?"

No audible answer, but the clumsy haste of a slow man in the consolatory.

"Summer will soon be here."

"*Soon!*"

"And meanwhile, when I can get away, we will run up to the Albemarle for a fortnight or so; and you shall go and see Esmeralda every night in the new play. *Every* night! Gabriel shall take you. Just you and he alone."

"No, no; you shall come too. I do not mind my old Freak!"

The high gaiety is returning to her tones.

"And now you are going to let me drive you down to the village in the pony-cart?"

"Yes; and you will take me to call on Mrs. Fairfax?"

"Of course, if you wish."

"What would Policeman X say?"

They have gone off laughing together before Lettice realizes that the engaging sobriquet applies to herself; and is evidently one habitually used between husband and wife.

Puzzled, mortified, miserable, she watches them drive off, the fresh pony pulling like mad, the harness-mounts flashing, and Marie, toqued like a tropical bird, unsuitable, Londony, and lovely, sending her sharp mirth through the stinging stillness of the air.

Miss Trent's eyes wander from her dwindling relatives to the church path, upon which no human speck is yet visible. What can have so changed him? Illness? Perhaps, highly strung as he is, weakened by previous suffering, the sudden reaction from despair to such intense joy may have brought on a return of nerve-breakdown.

As the hours pass, and he does not appear, this theory establishes itself more and more firmly in her mind. In restless discomfort she goes out-of-doors, telling the butler—an inward blush accompanies the announcement—that she does not mean to leave the gardens.

One of the head-gardener's boys has broken his leg playing hockey on the ice, and she goes to see him; the main motive of her visit leavened, perhaps, by a hope of hearing soothing regrets for the

old *régime* from the boy's mother, to whom she has always been specially kind.

Mrs. Macneill is not, apparently, of those who "let others hail the rising sun!" She prefers to do it herself; and her enthusiasm is excessive over the bride's beauty and the graciousness of her manner, which seems to have consisted in slapping the whole family on the back, literally as well as figuratively, when brought by Jim to make their acquaintance.

It is with spirits, to say the least, not raised that Miss Trent takes leave.

The coachman's wife has a quinsy, and the next visit is paid to her. She is in bed, choking, and almost inarticulate, yet finds means to convey her sense of the extraordinary rejuvenation wrought by his marriage in the squire. Through the fumes of a steam-kettle she sends her opinion that "he does not look like the same gentleman."

Lettice listens in silence, and departs, saying to herself that the feudal feeling is extinct. No hurrying footman pursues her to stove or fernery; and she is able to end her cold—in every sense—*giro* undisturbed.

Jim returns alone to tea. "I left Marie at the church. The brougham is to fetch her at half-past six."

"*At the church?*"

"Yes, playing the organ. You know how musical she is!"

Lettice does not know it; the memory of the punished piano and the deafening music-hall choruses in the Wimbledon drawing-room have led her to no such conclusion.

"Did you leave her alone there?"

"Well, no, Chevening was with her; he had been showing her the church, and he very good-naturedly offered to blow for her."

"Oh!"

"Marie asked him to dinner to-night. I—I hope you do not mind?"

"Mind! Why should I mind?"

"Oh, that is all right."

The relief of his tone, coupled with the slight trouble that had marked the announcement of his wife's hospitality, shows Lettice that he has not forgotten.

All right! That is scarcely the epithet that his sister applies to the situation when she escapes to her room a little later to face it alone.

Mrs. Trent returns in tearing spirits, highly audible before she is well within the hall door, scorning the summons of the dressing-bell, resolutely staying on in the morning-room with one paste-buckled foot on the fender, and her Macaw toque a good deal on one side, while she jubilantly goes over again with Jim the details of what has evidently been a triumphal progress through the village.

At dinner her radiancy and her volubility reach a still higher level. She has a thousand questions to put to Chevening as to his flock, and if he does not immediately recognize by her description those members of it to whom she is alluding, recklessly mimics their peculiarities in utter disregard of the silent critics in and out of livery behind her chair.

As Lettice listens she realizes with painful wonder how much more the village has come out to its new patroness in an hour than a lifetime of not con-

sciously condescending kindness had ever made it do to its old one. The ancient gentlewomen living each on her microscopic *rentes* in little houses round the common, Miss Smith, Miss Butler, and Miss Lamotte, have apparently confided to Mrs. Trent dark suspicions of their "generals" and little grievances against each other, such as her sister-in-law has never evoked; and even Mrs. Taylor—Lettice had thought that Mrs. Taylor would be loyal—has breathed to this brand-new comer that revolt against Providence for her unclerical paucity of children and plethora of bilious headaches, which Miss Trent had imagined to have been dropped into her own safe ear alone. But worse follows.

"And the hall—the Rachel Hall, as you call it? Why do you call it so?"

"It was built in memory of Mrs. Trent; her name was Rachel," replies Randal, in a lowered voice, stealing a surreptitious look across at Lettice.

Her eyes are on her plate. She is dressed with rigid simplicity; certainly paler, and if possible, neater than ever, the little bunch of snowdrops she wears completing the picture of almost awful chastity which she presents. The wonder flashes across the curate's brain whether this lofty virgin can be the creature who twenty-four hours ago clung about his neck with a passion scarcely inferior to his own.

"Oh, I see!"—with a perceptible drop of the voice too, and a slight respectful pause. Then, with a thrill of delight and interest, "You give plays and entertainments there?"

"No-o; we have temperance meetings, and

University Extension Lectures, and sometimes a magic lantern."

Marie's jaw drops for a moment, but only for a moment.

"We must get up something when my sister comes. That depends, of course, upon how long the new play runs. You know that she is on the stage—lucky girl! So should I be, if Jim had not insisted on marrying me."

She heaves a loud sigh, and Lettice's large white eyelids slightly quiver. All the servants are in the room. Mrs. Trent's elbows are on the table—where they mostly are—and her hands are flourishing about. Her unusual amount of gesticulation is, no doubt, part of the heritage from "dear mamma."

"I want to get up a ballet," pursues Marie, giving a delighted glint of her eye in the direction of the ice statue of disapproval on her left. "Mrs. Taylor says that she has never seen a ballet! I have a club of ballet-girls in London, and am going to have them down here, three or four at a time, to rest and recoup. Poor things, they are dreadfully overworked! but they will not stay if they are not amused—quite right, too."

She throws this gage across the table at Jim, in obvious challenge; but his mode of taking it up is to nod in baffling assent, with a smile that seems to say, "You are not going to get a rise out of me."

The bride turns again to Chevening. "Have you ever acted?"

"Yes, now and then, before I took Holy Orders."

"Never since?"

Her little face is brimful of gay relish for the flippancy of her implication. His ladylove listening in unspeakable protest, is pleased to hear something of the Apostle note that has always awed herself in the stiff-backed quality of his rejoinder.

"Not consciously, I hope."

It is the one bright spot during dinner. Perhaps because the rebuke is so absolutely ignored as to lead only to a comprehensive offer to coach him for any *rôle* he may like to undertake, and to searching inquiries as to what class or part he most shone in during his lay career, that the note of disapproval does not reappear.

What does reappear is Lulu, threading her dilapidated way among the decanters; dropping her early Victorian ringlets over the dishes; getting her tail into the candles. And not a sign of regret that Miss Kirstie's high chair knows her no more comes to soothe her swelling-hearted mistress.

Will Marie never remove her elbow and push back her chair, and finish the cigarette, held so long between two fingers in the eagerness of her chatter, as to go out? She does so at last, and the ex-mistress, chafed and mortified, passes, still downcast-eyed, through the door.

Marie throws herself into a chair, and drawing a candle towards her, lights a fresh cigarette.

"The conservatory is not lit," she says, "so I can't take Jim there to-night; but I will join him in the smoking-room."

She says it in her most off-hand way, and there is no detectable malice in her eye; but Lettice

starts, wincing. There is no attempt to disguise the fact that Mrs. Trent is behind the scenes.

"I can't think why he went into the Church," pursues Marie, still enacting the proverbial fool's part, but with no apparent consciousness of it. "I am sure he has no vocation, and"—regretfully—"he would have made a good actor."

It is too much, and poor Miss Trent gives herself away.

"I think, if you do not mind, we will not discuss him."

Mrs. Trent is as good as her word, and without taking much trouble to disguise the overttness of her intentions, leaps to her feet on the entrance of the two men, and publicly recapturing her kicked-off shoes, whirls the unprotesting, as much as uncomprehending, Jim away into space.

Chevening looks after her for the few seconds she remains in sight, before he faces his mistress with the question—

"Does she know?"

Miss Trent is standing drawn up in ruffled, yet trembling maidenliness against the jamb of the tall chimney-piece.

"I do not know."

There is trouble and agitation and injury in her whole aspect. The next moment she is clasped without preface or permit to his high black breast.

Her first impulse is to escape from the sudden taken-for-grantedness; but, remembering that it is the real thing, and that her over-night action leaves no doubt that she is as much swept off her feet as he, she acquiesces, and her rejoinder to his perfervid "*At last!*" is so full of upbraiding passion

as to thrill with astonishment both herself and him. Her stout virginal defence of the outworks had not prepared him for so sudden and complete a surrender of heart and lips.

"Why is it *at last?*" her mouth sighs to his.

"You may well ask, sweet."

But it is several seconds before his sweet gets any other explanation than inarticulate caresses.

"I have expected you all day."

They sit down at last, holding each other's hands.

"It has been a day of annoyances," the curate begins, with a ring of unfeigned irritation in his voice. "All morning I was with the vicar, trying to get him to see reason."

"About what?"

Chevening passes a long, well-bred hand—his only free one—over his silky hair with a gesture of impatience.

"I have been asked to preach at Swyndford, the Duke of Swyndford's, on behalf of the Duchess's Home for Fallen Mothers."

"Yes? and the vicar objects?"—incredulously.

"He made a difficulty over it. The date is, unluckily, that on which the Bishop of Stepney is to preach at Bradling, and it seems Taylor had set his heart upon going to hear him—at least, that is what he said; perhaps, without his knowing it, a little *jalousie de métier* came in too."

"Oh, no, I am *sure* not!"—warmly. "So you have had to refuse?"

"No-o. The vicar is a right-thinking fellow, and he saw at last that he had no business to stand in my light. It is an opening fraught with possibilities. The duke has an immense amount of pat-

ronage, which the duchess practically dispenses. It may be the beginning of better things! *Now* more than ever"—the falcon eye lightening, and chest expanding—"with such an incentive as you have given me, I am resolved not to be much longer curate of Trent."

She listens doubtfully, halting between two opinions, catching something of the flame of his ambition, yet not quite content with its quality, and heartily distressed at the unselfish vicar having been pushed to the wall.

"You are glad?" he asks, his own brow clouding a little at the cloud on hers. "Oh, if you knew what the thought is to me that never again in joy or grief shall I be alone!"

For a second she feels oddly unresponsive; then remembering, presses his hand.

"You have accounted for the morning," she says, smiling; "but what about the afternoon?"

"It has been a day of *contretemps!*" he answers with a recurrence of exasperation. "I was on my way to you, having only just escaped the clutches of the printer's devil from Bradling, who came over about the proofs of my Advent sermons. You know I have been asked to publish them?"

"I did not know it."

Her eye shines. How gratifying!

"I was just getting on my bicycle when Jim and his 'missus' drove up, and I had to go with them to show her the church, and then nothing would serve her but she must try the organ—I should think a banjo would be nearer her mark—and I had to blow for her."

"What a hard fate!"

He detects a little point of jealousy in the good-humoured irony of her phrase.

"It was to me. And by the time she had played over every chant and voluntary she could lay her hands on—a fine hash she made of them!—it was too late."

There is such an unaffected weariness and impatience in his tone, and the action that he fits to his explanation is so tender and suitable, that the weight which has been on it all day lifts partially—she herself could not say why it does not entirely—from her heart.

"I was disappointed," she says; then, feeling that the expression is too tame for the situation, "*That* goes without saying; but the more so because I cannot bear that there should be a delay in telling Jim. He would probably not make any difficulties now."

There is a rather mournful emphasis on the adverb, and its effect upon Chevening is not as exhilarating as might have been expected.

"He would say to me, 'May I ask how you propose to support my sister?'"

"And you would answer, 'She is only too proud and pleased to support me.'"

The girl accompanies this pretty presentation to him of her loaves and fishes with a smile of real pleasure, but he does not seem to hear.

"How can I make him understand that I have a future? I know it"—with a raised elation of voice, and flashing, confident eyes—"since last night, I know it—know that I shall come to the front, that I shall make myself felt; but by what method can I convey that to him? Nothing short

of the accomplished fact will ever reach dear old Jim."

The slight and unintended contempt of the tone used piques the really affectionate sister.

"We are cut out of the same block, he and I. Marie said that I am 'poor old Jim in petticoats.' She applied it to the outside, but it is quite as true of the inside."

"To the *outside!*" cries he, scanning the fair face so close to his with passionate derision. "Love in her case must indeed be blind!"

Once again the reassuring thrill at his contact—reassuring as to this being Love indeed—sends its tremulous quiver over her. It silences her.

"Why should you ask his leave?" asks Randal, presently, in a key that has less of tenderness than of pride and revolt in it; "he did not ask yours."

The parallel jars upon her.

CHAPTER XII

THE early days of a betrothal are generally supposed to have less of alloy in their gold than is to be found in any of the other occasions where man's and woman's destiny meets. It is said that the two sure ways of being spoken well of are to be engaged to be married and to die. In both cases only your virtues emerge like mountain-tops from the sea of kindness that washes over you.

And if your situation produces this optimistic view among your mere acquaintances, or the friends who have mastered all your weak points, what must it do in the case of the him or the her to whom you have never shown any but your sun-kissed side? And though it is a rule to which, as every one knows, there is no exception, that an intimate knowledge of any human creature must reveal some unexpected frailty, some little unhand-someness at best, yet each freshly troth-plighted pair of lovers believes that the other will always keep up to the same impossible level of beauty, amiability, and tenderness upon which Love's first valuation had set them.

When the inevitable discovery comes, it may be of nothing worse than that he can't keep awake while she is reading aloud to him, or that she has some pet stinginesses with which he has no sympathy, the disappointment is as great as would

Adam's have been if he had discovered in his flawless Eve a hair-lip or club-foot.

Lettice's is not the same case as that of those persons who fall into each other's arms out of the blue, knowing nothing of one another's antecedents. She would have said that in Chevening's character there was nothing left for her to learn. The last year of intimacy has taught her not only the keenness of his longings to spend the gifts of which he can't but be conscious in leaving the world a higher and better place than he found it, but also the shortness of his temper when his lofty aspirations have their Pegasus wings clipped by the vicar, and are set to the obscure daily plough of house-to-house visiting. She has, with thrilled ears, heard him; has seen him, white with emotion, thrust home into his hearers the sword of his fiery warning against the sins of the flesh. Once or twice it has struck her that there is a note of personal suffering in the burning words which picture that warfare. She has listened to his philippics against luxury; his scorn of cotton-wool-wrapped bodies and naked souls; his noble pictures of the severe high bliss of renunciation and abstinence. But she has also known how thoroughly upset he has been by some little extra nastiness in the food provided by his landlady, and how much truth there is in the accusation, gently, regretfully, and only occasionally, brought against him by the vicar of neglecting the schools.

He has always told her that his nature is not an ascetic one, has implied that the meshes of sense hold him with a tenacity superior to that with which they grip others, and she has acquiesced in

silent sympathy with the stress of his fight, never for a moment doubting the vigorous reality of his resistance, nor his ultimate victory in the war.

She could not herself tell for how much the conviction that his future lies in her hands, to be made or unmade by his love for her, has counted in her abandonment of herself to him. There are chastised pure souls whom a balked or betrayed devotion to some human object lifts to a higher plane of holiness and strenuous labour for God and man, to whom the extinction of the earthly light serves only to turn the heavenly from a glimmer into a blaze; but to this saintly fellowship Lettice has long known that her Randal does not belong.

Yet with all this preparation of foreknowledge there is surprise, tinged with vague dread, in the uneasy compound of feelings that she takes to bed with her on this first night of her engagement. His ambition is a familiar thing to her, sympathized with and encouraged through many a warm twilit hour, of champing revolt on his part against the narrowness of his limitations, the lack of a larger air in which to set free the message his labouring soul has to tell the world. She has rejoiced with him over each little indication that slowly but surely he is beginning to be heard of beyond the goose-haunted village green; has upborne him in hours of desperation, when he has tramped up and down the room, crying in heart-wrung accents, "Am I going to my grave without having had any audience but Miss Smith, Miss Butler, and Miss Lamotte?"

Something in the tone in which he utters this arraignment of providence always makes the parrot

scream, and the scolding and covering the too sensitive bird with a snatched-up bit of brocade has more than once brought a welcome relaxation of tension to the suffering apostle and his confidant. But the sympathy and encouragement have always been poured forth so liberally in the ardent faith that there *is* a message, and that it is to deliver *it* that expansion and elevation are so passionately craved.

Of the message there has to-day been little trace, and there has been a good deal of frank worldliness in the triumph of the lover's tone when announcing the opening he sees ahead of him in the invitation to preach at Swyndford. That the vicar should be kicked into the corner, and that a duchess and fallen mothers should be the first step in the ladder that leads up to light, is no part of Miss Trent's programme.

His disinclination to tell Jim of their engagement has a possibly noble side, upon which she tries through the watches of the night to keep her eyes fixed. He is too proud to ask for her as a beggar; he would fain come with something in his hand, some opening prospect or beckoning hope, and this most honourable desire perfectly explains the apparently eager selfishness of his snatch at a chance of distinction. Yet she passes a wretched night, distressed by fears and misgivings.

Is his love for her, after all, going to materialize instead of spiritualizing him? For her sake is he going to snatch at the loaves and fishes which of himself he would have contemptuously passed by?

"Give me a little respite," he has said, just at the end. "Our secret will never be the same thing

after it has been handled and pawed and jawed over, and then I will go to Jim with my mendicant's bowl and ask him to put you into it. We both know what his answer will be, and he will be quite right. I have nothing, I am nothing; and it would be waste of breath to say to him as I say to you"—his stature seems to increase by a full inch as he disdainfully utters the words—"I shall not always be curate of Trent."

It is with a heart not agitated by the bounding motion appropriate to her situation that next morning, about eleven o'clock, Lettice knocks at the door of her sister-in-law's dressing-room.

"May I come in?"

"Who is *I*? But come in, whoever you are."

Upon this reckless permission, whose full audacity is not realized until the inchoate state of Mrs. Trent's toilet is revealed, Lettice enters.

Marie's dressing has apparently been arrested by two different and on the surface discrepant occupations, evidenced by the lotion-bottle from which she is bathing Lulu's eyes, and the half-written letter on the blotting-pad upon her knee. The extreme lengthiness of her toilette operations is due not to any excessive care in decorating herself, but to the fact that at every stage of them they are checked by the impulse—instantly obeyed—towards some other and more interesting employment. Sometimes it is to clean a bird-cage, sometimes to try a new song on the banjo, sometimes to run over the last items of stage news in a theatrical paper; but there is always something, and that something always makes her late.

She is never in the least repentant or regretful

that it is so. Although she is ever prepared for disapproval in her sister-in-law, she would be quite unable to understand the distaste and indignation with which her small white fur-and-satin-wrapped figure and the sea of fine wavy hair billowing liberally about her tiny face are regarded by her visitor.

Lettice's own toilet is always carried out with the straight directness with which she attacks all the problems of life, with which, were she a man and a soldier, she would go up a breach.

"I am too early," she says, with an austere glance at the tall clock on the landing, where she is still standing. "I see that you are not ready."

"I am as ready as I shall be for some time to come," replies Marie, brazenly; "but ready for what?"

"You forget, perhaps"—with alarming civility—"that I asked you to let me go over the accounts of the societies, of which you will now have the management, before I give them up into your hands."

The hands mentioned fly up to the owner's face and cover it, with the pettish gesture of a child shirking physic, then drop down again.

"Why should I have the management of them?"

"Surely it is your place."

"I never do anything because it is my place."

"Oh!"

"Why should you give them up? You are here, you will be here—till you marry." If there is no great exhilaration in the voice that conveys this statement of fact, there is undoubtedly a touch of impudence in the rider added to it. "And perhaps even then you may not be too far off to take charge of them, and of us."

It is too much. The overheard "Policeman X" and Jim's laugh at it recur stingingly to a hearer already overset by the impertinent bad taste of Marie's implication. She draws the door towards her in order to shut it on the outside, but the other calls her back.

"Do not go. Let us have it out now. We are bound to have it out some time."

Lettice returns with dignified reluctance. "I do not understand what you mean."

"Oh, you soon will," retorts Marie, with her short, high laugh. "I mean that I am never going to have anything to say to your societies and things."

The dart is launched with a resolution that shows how entirely in earnest the small hand that hurls it is.

"Have you told Jim so?"

"Jim will be delighted. I mean, he will not care twopence one way or the other."

She watches for a moment with subdued glee the discomfited philanthropist before her; then—for her—grows grave.

"Whatever *you* began, I should be sure to make a mess of, and *vice versa*. If I am let alone I shall do very well. I have my own little methods. I see that I am going to get on very well with everybody. I do not in the least expect you to believe it, but wherever I have lived hitherto I have always been rather liked."

There is a sort of wistfulness underlying the beligerence of her tone, and Lettice is not sure that the nether lip of the Cupid's-bow mouth does not twitch a little. She feels a momentary softening;

but it disappears in a few seconds before the flip-pant liveliness of Marie's next speech. To an un-prejudiced spectator it might seem to be pride's revolt against showing emotion before one so hostile.

"Your Mothers' Unions, and your Home Missions, and your Guilds of the Good Shepherd, I cannot away with them, so there's an end on't!" she cries, waving her red flag, and declaiming theatrically.

"Then I need not trouble you any more."

The motion to withdraw is repeated, but is again arrested.

"No, stay; I have not half done. We have not nearly thrashed it out yet."

In her excitement she has sprung out of the arm-chair in which, with her usual shiveriness, she has been sitting nearly on the fire, rolling her writing-pad into the fender, and advancing towards her sister-in-law gesticulating.

"You love all this display and pomp!" she cries, waving vaguely towards the inside luxury and the outside silent stateliness.

"I do not know what you call display and pomp; it is a very ordinary country house."

There is a proud humility in the tone which reveals that this is not her real opinion.

"Well, whatever it is, you love it; you love the servants tumbling over each other, and the horrible way that everything goes by clockwork. It is a great blow to you to give it up—not to boss the show any longer."

"I can't see what object is gained by telling me this."

"Cannot you? Well, there is one. I want to say once for all, Why *do* you give it up?"

"Why do I give it up?" replies Lettice, unbuttoning her displeased blue eyes in unfeigned astonishment. "Surely I need not answer that question!"

"Why do you give it up?" repeats Marie, with flaming urgency. "Why should not you go on managing the household, and telling everybody their duty, and sitting at the head of the table, as you have always done?"

Then, as her hearer makes no answer beyond a look of scorn, she gallops on.

"If you think I should mind or be jealous, you are very much mistaken; I should be only too thankful. I hate and detest the whole thing. It is only for Jim's sake that I put up with it at all."

For once her implication of what she has sacrificed in becoming Mrs. Trent is not made with its usual purpose of "drawing" Miss Trent; but nevertheless it has that effect.

"I am afraid it is rather late to think of that now."

"Oh no, it is not. I shall get on very well if I am allowed to go my own way. In time, I dare say, I shall grow to admire that little path meandering across the dismal white sheet"—glancing out with a groan at the park—"shall be able to see those poor shivering deer without longing to invite them in to get warm! It is the first time I have wintered in England since I was ten, and oh, I wish I could think it would be the last!"

She has brought back her eyes from the outer world, and turned them upon her sister-in-law, with

what might be a half appeal in them, though her last speech seems uttered more as a relief to herself than with any expectation of sympathy. She pauses a moment, her little restless hands pulling at the ends of the rose-coloured sash of her dressing-gown, then begins again.

"I loathe punctuality and order, and all the odious little virtues that go to make up a good mistress of a house. I like to eat when I am hungry; not when that horrible, inexorable gong commands me to summon up an appetite. We had a gong at Wimbledon, but, dear old thing!"—lapsing into levity—"it never meant anything at all."

Lettice does not try to laugh at the little joke, nor does Marie expect it of her, having thus early made the hopeless discovery—hopeless with a view to possible friendship—that the same things never amuse them.

The bride opens her floridly monogrammed cigarette-case, which always jars upon Lettice's taste, as does the lighting up and puffing that follows.

"So that is settled," she says, with a sigh of relief, sinking again into her chair, picking up the writing-pad from the fender, and recapturing Lulu and the lotion-bottle. "We will both enjoy ourselves in our own way; you shall have the birch-rod and the sceptre, and the Friendly Girls, and all the rest of it; and I will have Jim and Lulu"—lifting the old dog's grizzled muzzle and kissing it—"and we will all be as late and idle and foolish as we like!"

"Jim never was late, or idle, or foolish," retorts Lettice, unwisely rising to this galling fly.

"Oh, wasn't he?" replies Marie, with an exasperating air of interest and surprise. "Then it is quite time that he began."

Mrs. Trent is as good as her word, and the days and weeks that go by fully prove it.

The thought of how neglected and mismanaged all her local philanthropies, now rolling on the oiled wheels of long habit and efficient guidance, would be, when fallen into the hands of her brother's despised wife, has been one of the bitterest of the grudges nursed by Lettice against the interloper. But that ground is now knocked from under her feet. At first she has not believed in Marie's renunciation, and it has required the emphatic confirmation of Jim to persuade her of its sincerity.

"Marie has told you," he begins one morning at the *tête-à-tête* breakfast, which is now their chief opportunity for communicating with each other, "that she does not wish to interfere with you in any way."

Lettice looks up from the mess she is compounding for the birds with as liberal a hand as if their fairy godmother—the thaw had not blessed them with pierceable clods and reachable worms. She always feels a fear when with Jim now, from the consciousness of what she is hiding from him; and the ill-at-ease look that his face always now takes when mentioning his wife to her, contrasted with the *naïf* freedom and expansiveness of his early ebullitions, vexes her to the heart. He answers her dumb inquiry.

"She wants you to understand that she will not tamper with any of the charities that you have set

going in the parish; she is sure that you manage them so much better than she would."

"Did she say so?"

"I am not much given to romancing," replies her brother, bluntly. "I should not have said so if she had not."

"It is probably true," rejoins Lettice, "that I do, and I should have been only too glad to help her with all my experience; but do you think that it can be quite right—quite doing her duty—to shift the whole responsibility on to some one else's shoulders?"

Mr. Trent is essentially a still man, yet there is fidgetiness in the way in which he balances a knife between his finger and thumb as he answers—

"I think that I should be glad if she did not hear quite so much about her 'duty' just yet."

Miss Trent has been so little used to being snubbed by her brother, that her cheek burns to smarting under the reproof, but she tries to speak moderately.

"It is not that I grudge the trouble; you know I have always loved the sort of work. But even waiving that question, do you know what else she suggested?" The girl makes a dramatic pause, and opens her eyes rather widely. "She suggested that I should manage the household, and sit at the head of the table. Is that also your wish?"—with an accent of almost compassionate incredulity.

Mr. Trent is resorting to what of late has been his favourite method of defence against his sister, and a very little space now parts him from the fine

old mahogany door; but her final question makes him turn.

"Let it be understood, once for all," he says firmly, and not without dignity, "that I wish my wife to have whatever can make this place and its ways less irksome and disagreeable to her. She has sacrificed so much in marrying me—almost everything in the world that she cared for—that the least I can do is to try and make her life as tolerable to her as I can."

He is gone, his sister staring, moonstruck, after him. It is the longest speech she has ever heard him make, and the fullest confession of his besotment.

Later, she comes across him again at the stables, where she has gone to give her pony its morning carrot; and it is with a pang that she sees his artless attempt to escape unseen into the harness-room.

"Do not run away," she says, trying to smile; "I am not going to say anything disagreeable."

He halts, only partially reassured.

"You left me in such a hurry this morning, that you did not give me time to explain."

"I have not much opinion of explanations."

She sees that his ramparts are still bristling with guns, but advances, waving a white flag.

"The reason why I was anxious for Marie to take her proper place is that, of course, I shall not long be here."

"What do you mean?"

"Of course, I am only here as a visitor; I am naturally no longer going to live here."

"Where are you going to live?"

She hesitates, a momentary flush of resentment against her betrothed for the equivocal position in which his request for secrecy has put her darting through her mind.

"There are plenty of places," she answers lamely.

His own slow, good-humoured smile replaces the dogged look of self-defence on Jim's face.

"Do not be an ass, old girl!" he says, taking the cudgel out of his simple Saxon phrase by accompanying it with a friendly pat on the shoulder, "and do not talk tommy-rot. Of course, you will live here; and of course we shall all get on like—like smoke, if only you will remember that the best text in all the Bible is 'Live and let live.'"

There is a slight choke in the laugh with which she assures him that no such text exists, and Miss Kirstie here comes to the rescue of a difficult situation by squeezing herself inside a loose box, and trying the taste of the bay cob's heels. He retorts by lashing out at the place where her brains ought to be; and in delivering and sending her off, smacked and sulky, with her tail well down, brother and sister seal and cement their peace.

CHAPTER XIII

"LIVE and let live." It sounds the simplest, facilest, slip-me-down-easy kind of injunction that could be laid upon man or woman. Experience teaches that no harder rule of conduct has ever been prescribed. To "live" is difficult; to "let live" is, to many natures, nearly impossible. It is so hard to believe that those who differ from us radically in aim, method, and conduct of life owe their unlikeness less to the wilful wrong-headedness and inherent turpitude with which we feel inclined to credit them, than to a structural difference in mind or constitution. To see ourselves as others see us is a great gift. To see others as they see themselves is perhaps a greater, and it must have struck most of us now and then that domestic life might run on smoother wheels if we were able to see the springs and pulleys of the human clocks that tick beside us, instead of only their expressionless dial-plates.

It is a physical impossibility to get into any one else's bodily skin. Is it easier to do so in the case of his or her mental and moral one? It is not the abysmal deeps of differences in faith or principle that make the most hopeless divisions between members of the same household. These may be silently respected, and cause no great friction in detail. But how can one who rises with the lark

and lies down with the lamb live in peace and amity with another who would fain lie down when the lark rises, and rise when the lamb retires? How can she, every shining hair on whose sleek head has its allotted place, really foregather with her whose locks are as gaily free from any controlling law as their mistress, whom not all the efforts of an active, conscientious maid can keep untorn, *unchiffonnée*, straight?

Marie never defends or apologizes for her frailties, but she sometimes gives a slight careless explanation of them.

"I have never been used to going to bed," she says. "When dear mother died, father used to like us to sit up with him, to make him feel less lonely; and afterwards, there never was enough time in the day for all the things one wanted to do."

She gave a little sigh to the memory of the past delightful scurry. The explanation is addressed to her husband, but it is her sister-in-law who responds.

"That was not much to be wondered at if you never got up till twelve."

Miss Trent has tried to make her rebuke sound gentle; but through the mildness of the key the policeman's rattle is plainly audible. It may be fancy that Marie's magnificent left eye closes in an infinitesimal wink at Jim, and it also may not.

Whatever else Mrs. Trent is, she is at least a woman of her word. She is never in time for dinner, nor does she ever manifest the slightest interest, or attempt the smallest interference in Lettice's management of her clubs, unions, and guilds. The question of the headship of the dinner-table remains

in abeyance. Marie has forsaken it, on the double plea of liking to have her back to the fire and to be near Jim; and Lettice, naturally and justly, refuses to resume it.

Since it is the wish of the mistress that no attention shall be paid to her vagaries, the mechanism of the house remains unchanged. The bells and gongs maintain the iron exactitude of their summons, and the little freakish refreshments at odd hours, which are the bride's *beau idéal* of cuisine, do not materially add to the labours of the footman who carries them to the door of her boudoir or the lady's-maid who takes them in. Strange to say, even if some unaccountable quirk of their new lady does drive them from their routine, and put them to extra trouble, they do not seem to mind it.

Mrs. Trent has that mysterious gift which always does, and always will, defy analysis or definition—"a way with her." The virtue of it does not lie in her beauty—many Venuses have lacked it—nor in her wisdom or her goodness. In both these qualities her sister-in-law, mournfully reflecting over the problem, pronounces her deplorably deficient. Can it lie in that unhigh-bred, universal familiarity of hers, that hail-fellow-well-metness with all creation, which yet, as her critic must grudgingly own, does not seem to provoke answering liberties? Can it reside in her taste for empiric remedies? for she dearly loves physicking.

It is some while before Lettice will admit to herself the patent fact how greatly the gardener's broken-legged boy and the coachman's quinsied wife prefer Marie's quack medicines, seasoned with

bad jokes, and her visits, to her own and the doctor's orthodox treatment and grave benevolence.

Marie is not in the least benevolent; she would tell you so herself. It would not express the case rightly to say that she is "kind" to the people about her. She is only, as it were, for her own pleasure, deeply, deeply interested in them in pill-ing and plastering and pulling their confidences out of them by direct question and lively partaking.

The ulcer on little Sidney Plant's head, which Lettice, duty-driven, surveys with inward nausea, provokes in Marie only an acute desire to treat it personally after her own method; and her small forefinger travels round the repulsive area of pain with unaffected enjoyment in ascertaining how near her nice touch can go without hurting the patient.

"I am a sawbones spoilt!" she says, looking up radiantly at Jim, who has run her to earth. "Why"—plaintively—"do not you set up some ailment, if it were only a *boil*? I should love to treat you for it."

He answers her by a laugh that has a touch of wonder in it.

"I always doctored the children," she goes on, sitting back on her heels—she is kneeling by the child's bed, and her great eyes growing wistful, as they do when her own people are mentioned—"and they do me credit, don't they?"

Mrs. Trent has no theories as to the rights to equality of the race, her stock-in-trade in that commodity being *nil*, but she never can remember to think of any difference in the social plane, whether an inch higher or a foot lower of the person she

is talking to. Whether this be the master-key she uses or some other, there can be no doubt that, in several cases, she slips into the secret chamber of hearts at whose front door Lettice has been decorously ringing for years.

"How *did* you get the Growcotts to tell you about Annie?" Miss Trent asks one day, when her grudging wonder at conspicuous success of her sister-in-law's has overcome her dislike to discussing her methods.

"I asked them."

"*Asked them!* Why, nobody has ever dared approach the subject!"

"Well, there is no subject I daren't approach, so I did. I told them I did not think a pin the worse of her."

"You did not! You couldn't! It was the most aggravated case of immorality and deceit that has ever happened in the parish!"

"I told them I felt certain I should have done the same myself if I had been in her predicament; and when that did not seem to console them much, I added that I was not at all sure that *you* would not, too! That fetched them round wonderfully!"

She is out of the room before the outraged listener can hurl the richly deserved brickbat at her head.

It is among her humbler surroundings—servants, dependents, and tenants—that Mrs. Trent's first successes are scored. Whether the same prosperity will attend her among a higher class is a question that Lettice asks herself with very mixed feelings. Of course, she would be miserable at the idea that Jim's wife should discredit him. This is the re-

spectable sentiment kept on show; but, packed well under it, the girl is sometimes aware of a little shabby hankering after finding some echo in other breasts of her own deep dislike and disapproval.

The neighbours speed to call, curiosity adding long wing-feathers to civility's pinions. They invite the bride and bridegroom to dinner, and the new pair go, Marie invariably late, having generally mislaid the invitation, doubtful, but perfectly indifferent, as to whether or not it is the right day. She always departs lamenting, jeering, and invoking odd little curses on her hosts; she invariably returns with some fresh food for her active imagination and insatiate curiosity about her fellow-creatures to assimilate.

After the first of these functions Lettice cautiously sounds her brother at breakfast next morning.

"Was it pleasant?"

"H'm! much the same as usual."

"You were rather late, were not you?"

"Marie did not notice when the carriage was announced. She was interested talking to a young Frenchman who is coaching the boys; he knew Coquelin"—with an indulgent smile—"so, of course, that set her off, and she did not perceive that everybody but us had gone."

"Rather embarrassing."

"Not in the least. The boys swarmed round her, and Sir James and milady joined in, and it was by far the best bit of the evening."

"Oh! And were they amused? Did Marie startle them at all?"

"They did not confide it to me if she did."

The bristles, which have sprung into existence with his marriage, are rising, and the questioner desists.

Lettice will not now need to rely upon questions for getting information as to Marie's conduct in society, since the return dinners to be given at Trent will afford her opportunities for observation on her own account. She awaits the first with trepidating curiosity. The invitations have been sent, and the arrangements made by herself, Mrs. Trent being with difficulty brought to lend an ear to the subject, but acquiescing with the greatest readiness in everything proposed.

"I wash my hands of it!" she cries, lifting her fingers from the keyboard of the piano, where she sits, and suiting her gesture to the words, "so that if there is a catastrophe——"

"I am not at all afraid of that"—with a dignified confidence born of the memory of a hundred well-ordered feasts.

"No," rejoins the other, with a look of thoughtful humour; "there will not be even the excitement of thinking that the cook may very likely be found drunk under the kitchen-table ten minutes before dinner-time, or that the food will not go round. How dull!"

"Have you arranged how you will send the people in to dinner to-night?" asks Lettice on the afternoon of the appointed day. "Only three or four of them have any real precedence; but the less the precedence the greater the sensitiveness generally."

A look of ineffable boredom passes over Marie's face.

"Cannot I say 'I have not the least idea which among you are the greatest swells, so sort yourselves'?"

"You know that that is impossible."

"Is it? We always sorted ourselves at home. You are going to say that that is not a parallel case. I am afraid"—with a sigh that almost heaves Lulu off her lap—"that it is not."

Miss Trent has bitted and bridled herself before entering upon the present interview, so she only says, glancing at a little diagram of the dinner-table which she holds in her hand—

"Jim will, of course, take Lady Clapperton, and you will go in with Lord Clapperton."

"Tit for tat!" replies Marie, blandly inattentive. "And what am I to say to Lord Clapperclaw?"

From the days of the immortal "Miggs," with her insulting "Miss Varson," and probably before that date, there has been a peculiarly exasperating quality in the wilful miscalling of a name, and the Clappertons are dear to Lettice's soul. They have been hereditary friends of the Trents for generations, the two families having for centuries trotted through life alongside of each other, neck to neck in the race, and though within the last thirty years the Clappertons have shot ahead by dint of marrying greater heiresses and possessing more brains, the solid amity welded out of thousands of dead kindnesses and buried sympathies still holds firmly.

"Lord Clapperton"—pronouncing the final syllable very distinctly—"is a brilliant talker—most great lawyers are. Many people think he will end by being Lord Chancellor."

"That is not the same as Lord Chamberlain, is

it?" asks Marie, innocently. "If so, I could have asked him why he made them take off *Rats* at the Garrulity after it had only run three nights."

But Lettice is not to be "drawn." She dresses for the party with her heart in her boots. The reflection crosses her mind how very often it is there now, coupled with a wonder that the possession of the love of her life—a term by which she is always careful to allude to the curate to herself—has so little power to raise her spirits.

Even his perfect sympathy with her—a sympathy which he would like to make more overt than she allows—upon the subject of Marie fails to be productive of any real satisfaction. She is glad that he dislikes Mrs. Trent, glad that his eye meets her own now and again in understanding distaste and disapproval; yet conscience and loyalty to Jim forbid her indulging in the unspeakable refreshment of telling Randal, and letting him tell her, how cordially both detest the new-comer. She feels compelled, on the contrary, to put a drag upon the wheel of his eloquence, and has to do so this very evening.

The company have reached the dinner-table in safe decorum. Marie has not, after all, insisted on "shooing" them before her like a flock of turkeys. She is not more than a quarter of an hour late in appearing, and as the Clappertons have been detained by the unpunctuality of the judge's train from London, she is in the room almost as soon as they. By a string of accidents it happens that this is her first meeting with them, and she begins at once to talk to them with her usual high volubility, no slightest consciousness of being on view before

the arbiters of the neighbourhood lowering her voice or lending a shade of diffidence to her manners.

Lettice winces as snatches of Marie's rattling chatter reach her across the room. *Poor Jim!* His bride might have let it dawn more gradually upon his oldest friends what a miracle of underbreeding he has chosen to fill his mother's place! But she is clearly determined that from the outset there shall be no mistake.

"This is the first time I have witnessed your public dethronement," Miss Trent's lover says to her, neglecting his soup to glance with an expression in his eyes that startles even her—so full of angry detestation is it—towards the head of the table.

"It is not her fault; she hates being hostess."

"As she hates everything that looks like a duty," he rejoins severely.

"She is much neater than usual to-night," says Lettice, ashamed of the prick of satisfaction felt by her, and laying about for something to commend, "and has not nearly so many bangles on. If only that dreadful bracelet with the photographs of those twelve actors and actresses whom nobody ever heard of could come to grief!"

"Why does Jim allow her to loll her arms about the table in the way she does?" continues Randal, not much attending to his *fiancée's* aspiration, but continuing his own hostile observation.

The wrath of his tone is so disproportioned to the cause that Lettice looks at him in wonder.

"How violently you dislike her! After all, she

has never done you any harm. I think you ought to struggle against it."

"She is the type of woman that is, of all others, most repellent to me," he answers in a key that shows little inclination to take his love's Christian hint in good part. "It was an evil day for the parish when she came into it."

"The parish does not think so."

His vituperation has exceeded the bounds of that moderate cavilling which gives her pleasure, and some of the frightened surprise she feels must be visible in her face, for with an apparent effort he changes his venue.

"It is intolerable to me to see her in your place."

Her voice sinks. "Yet it is owing to her that I am able to leave it."

He does not take up the challenge, and she thinks he cannot have heard it.

"If you dislike the conditions in which you see me—and you can't do so more than I do myself—it lies with you to take me out of them."

The overture, so out of keeping with the whole tenor of her proud and modest life, painfully suffuses her soft-textured face, and for a moment she feels hotly indignant with him for that it has not come from him. But the flash of passionate gratitude with which he recompenses it effaces the impression.

"How can I thank you?"

"By taking me to a six-roomed cottage where there are no in-laws," she answers, the effort it costs her to make a proposition so out of keeping with her whole life and character lending it an exaggerated emphasis.

"I really believe that you mean it," he answers, with a sort of break in his voice.

"Show that you do," she says.

The words sound unbelievable in her own ears, and she knows that they do so in his, with their persistent initiative; yet the desperate logic of her thesis that in such a love as theirs concealment and coyness should have no place drives her on.

"You do not realize what this state of things is to me—the hiding what there is no reason to hide, the continual chafe and grate here"—with a glance towards the head of the table. "If you did you would take me away."

Her revolted blue eyes have lifted themselves in bitter upbraiding to his, which plunge glowingly into them. Both have absolutely forgotten their dinners and their fellow-guests.

"You will drive me mad if you go on like this," he says, breathing heavily. "Do you think that I need any urging to take you to my arms? But I *must* have something in my hand when I ask for you."

"I am in no one's gift but my own," she answers, with a revival of pride and self-respect. "You yourself have told me so."

"Do you wish me to have the humiliation of taking all and giving nothing?" he asks from between the teeth that excessive excitement makes him set. "You have faith in me, but who else has? Wait, at all events, till after the 20th—till after I have preached at Swyndford."

"How very much you are counting upon that!" she says uneasily. "What do you expect to come of it?"

"I shall get a hearing. It is the only lever I have

ever asked for. I did not think that my other self would have needed to have that again explained."

There is impatience and reproach in his voice, but her rejoinder is not framed with a view to soothing him, and there is a distressed crease in her brow.

"A lever to help you to what? A fat living, or a fashionable pulpit? That is not what your other self had planned for you."

A flash of hot indignation at being thus schooled by his own disciple springs into his eyes, but it is in a tone of resolved patience such as one would employ to a slow-witted child that after a moment he answers her.

"You are confounding the means with the end. If I do passionately wish for the 'fashionable pulpit' that you twit me with, it is because I know that I have something worth hearing to say from it—something that the world will be the richer for. If I am anxious to climb the ladder, it is because more people will hear me when I am at the top than when I am at the bottom. The Swyndford pulpit is the first rung."

His sentence, begun in careful self-restraint, ends in open elation. His betrothed looks up at him in troubled sympathy. Is it real inspiration that is lightening in his hawk eye and dilating his fine nostril? The answer comes blurred and undecipherable, like a bad telegram, from the bottom of her heart.

"I wish it was over," she murmurs nervously. "The very excess of your desire to excel yourself——"

"May give me stage-fright, as our hostess would say," he interrupts, laughing derisively.

"No, I do not think that there is much fear of that."

"What would our hostess say?" cries Marie's ringing voice, sent in defiance of convention flying over orchids, guests, and Bleu-du-Roi Sèvres china to the distant speaker. "Something very much to the point, I am sure."

Her hearing is as abnormal as her other gifts; but apparently she does not care for an answer, returning at once to the biographical explanation she is evidently giving to Lord Clapperton of the theatrical bracelet, for whose destruction Lettice has sighed.

The great lawyer is looking with grave attention at the pretty slender arm lifted close to his near-sighted eyes, and following with apparently absorbed interest the history of each medallion portrait, as in succession they are turned round for his inspection.

Lady Clapperton is regarding the little drama with a smile, that Miss Trent is certain must be forced, through her tortoiseshell pince-nez, from the other end of the table. She has said all that she has to say to Jim—he is not a person with whom conversation rolls on easy wheels—and has been for some moments quite ready to go, a fact of which Marie does not become aware for some time, as indeed the separation of the sexes after dinner is one of the subjects upon which she holds strong opinions. When at last, her exegesis finished, she makes up her mind to depart, her tones are clearly audible in the regretful utterance to her neighbour—

"I do wish that you were coming too."

CHAPTER XIV

LETTICE had counted upon a half-hour's talk with her friend Lady Clapperton in the manless drawing-room interval, a soothing talk, when the hereditary ally would have shown, by delicately sympathetic indications, her perfect comprehension of and fellow-feeling with Miss Trent's attitude of mind towards her foe-in-law; and Lettice would have salved her own conscience, and kept her loyalty to Jim by generous admissions and noble reticences. But it soon appears she has reckoned without her guest. Marie's offer of her cigarette-box—at which a shudder runs over her sister-in-law's frame—is followed, not by the disgusted drawing up of Lady Clapperton's many-vertebrated neck, which seemed the only possible answer to it, but by an indulgent, laughing headshake, and a subsidence together of the incongruous pair upon a sofa. Then, as Lettice with inward groaning verifies, the theatrical bracelet again comes into play, and is a second time eagerly explained to an apparently absorbed listener.

The ex-mistress of the house does not show the heaviness of her spirit as she pays the pleasant and equally divided attentions that she has always done on like occasions to the rest of the company. She is conscious that her manners are, and have always been, thought good; but it is with a very distracted attention that their habitual appreciators listen to

her to-night. Their eyes are continually straying towards the daughter of Heth, who has slipped from the sofa on to the floor at Lady Clapperton's feet, and is breaking the butler's back in his endeavour to get the coffee-pot down low enough to pour coffee into her cup at a respectful angle.

Whatever subject Miss Trent starts it invariably circles round to the one which she is most resolute to avoid. Even Mrs. Taylor, so long her own sturdy henchwoman, and who ought to be used to Marie by now, can talk of nothing else. Mrs. Taylor's trips into society are few, thanks to that remarkable speciality in sick-headaches which fills her vicar with melancholy pride, but when she does emerge she enjoys herself with improbable violence.

"You heard Mrs. Trent's plan of taking me to the Empire?" she says, chuckling. "Was not it original of her? Mr. Taylor was shocked at first"—the vicar's wife belongs to the class who to their nearest and dearest would always talk of their husband as "Mr. Taylor"—"but now he owns that with that way of hers she can carry off anything."

When the men enter, the vicar draws a chair up between his spouse and Lettice. At a party it is always the good man's impulse to join his wife, but to-night she baffles him.

"I shall be a bad third," she says to Lettice, bustling off, beaming with good spirits. "You and Mr. Taylor have always so much to say to each other."

Her lord looks after her apprehensively. "Poor thing! how much she is enjoying herself, and yet she knows that she will have to pay for it to-morrow," he says with sombre exultation.

Lettice knows him too well to suggest that there may be for once *relâche* in Mrs. Taylor's post-dinner-party agonies; and indeed her eyes and thoughts have wandered from the excellent pair.

Randal is opening the piano at Marie's resonant command, fetching her banjo, being scolded for having brought the wrong music from the canterbury, and being finally packed off in favour of Lord Clapperton, whom she insists on having turn over the pages of her noisy song, a duty which the judge performs as one might expect that he would.

Lettice's heart burns for her lover. How intensely—with his deep antipathy to Mrs. Trent—must he dislike the whole exhibition! His back is turned towards his *fiancée*, so she cannot see the expression of his face, but she knows pretty well what it is likely to be. Yet, to her surprise, he does not accept his dismissal from the cave of harmony, but mingles with the little crowd of black coats that presently, thronging round, hide Steinway and singer, and the voice whose grave melody has so often thrilled her in intoning the Liturgy is plainly audible in the braying chorus of the latest imbecilities from the "Frivolity Girl." It is a strange world!

The party breaks up at last, fully an hour later than usual, though even then greatly against the hostess's will, who begs the guests severally and collectively to prolong their stay, and save her from the odious necessity of going to bed.

The vicar has remained throughout the performance by Lettice's side, with a look of puzzled amusement on his face, which the share taken by his curate in the musical orgy seems to heighten.

He leans across the arm of his chair to ask in a subdued voice whether Lettice has heard that Chevening is to preach at Swyndford on the 24th.

She nods assent, feeling a little prick of remorseful gratitude to him for not alluding to the sacrifice on his own part by which this has been made possible.

"He expects great things from it," continues the clergyman, looking with an air of troubled goodwill towards his subordinate. "I only hope he will not be disappointed."

The vicar has uttered Miss Trent's own misgiving—a thing that is always irritating—and perhaps he is aware of some lapse from tact in his utterance; at least, the shape of his next sentence looks like it.

"I hoped that he was getting more reconciled to his work here, fretting less over being thrown away as he thinks he is; he is certainly much more active in the parish than he used to be. I had noticed it myself, and Mrs. Trent tells me that she is continually meeting him at the bedsides of those among our sick people whom she has undertaken in her droll way to doctor."

A slight and instantly checked dart of surprise shoots across Lettice. It must be because so many more interesting subjects have crowded them out of Randal's memory, that he has omitted to mention to her the insignificant fact of these rencounters, so distasteful to him. There is a slight quickness in her voice as she answers dryly—

"It will not be very droll for them if she kills them!"

Then comes the break-up, and with it the vicaress, full of elated gratitude for "the most delightful evening she has ever spent, even here, where the evenings are always delightful," to fetch her "Mr. Taylor."

At the very last Lettice gets a fragment of speech with Lady Clapperton, but it is hardly of the character she had planned, and she soon finds that she may save her own "generous admissions and noble reticences" for a more propitious occasion.

"My dear, she takes one by storm! I had had rather a prejudice against her. I may own it to you now; but it is absolutely impossible to resist her. And what a lovely creature! She tells me that she has a sister who is far better-looking than herself on the stage, and a most promising young actress. What a strange new *milieu* for you! But we shall all be the better for being waked up a little."

"That is what Jim tells me; but personally I think I prefer being asleep."

She would not have said it had she not been cross, jaded, and bitterly disappointed in the total failure of sympathy where she had looked for it most confidently; and the hereditary ally, with her own sons secure, observes comfortably to her sleepy judge on their homeward way that she should have thought Lettice would have had the sense to make the best of it, but that she is evidently not going to do so.

"Of course, Mrs. Jim is as bad style as it is possible to be," pursues the lady, contentedly; "but one forgives anything to such a face."

"I never know when a woman is bad style," replies the judge, adjusting his head more satis-

factorily to his corner of the carriage; "and I am very much in love with her!"

* * * * *

It is a truism of truisms that our granted wishes often mock us—turn round and snap malicious fingers in our faces. There are few things that have been more ardently desired by Esmeralda Kergouet and her married sister than that Miss Tiny Villiers of the Garrulity should once more fall a prey to influenza! But though the season is singularly propitious—half the staff of the theatre being laid low—and Miss Villiers herself takes the malady severely and keeps it long, yet what does this avail to her ardent young understudy, since the piece itself is taken off? That incalculable factor, the British public, upon whose likings and dislikings the oldest and subtlest manager is unable to reckon with any certainty, has shown itself unmistakably disapproving, and in the stock piece, hastily put on to supply its place, there is no need—even hypothetical—for Miss Poppy Delafield.

Loud and long are the laments of Marie, uttered to any one who will listen to her. Warm and acute is the sympathy of Mrs. Taylor, and amused and interested that of Lady Clapperton, who happens to call on the day when the thunderbolt has fallen.

"There is only one bright spot in the whole thing," cries Mrs. Trent, with eyes made suddenly more brilliant by a glorious idea, and taking for granted, as she always does, that her subject is of as enthralling an interest to her interlocutor as it is to herself—"you will all see her much sooner than you would otherwise have done. As she has no engagements, she will be able to come down at

Easter with the others. As I told you, all my people are coming at Easter—father, the girls, the boys, everybody but poor Gabriel; and, thank God, Easter is early this year.”

Miss Trent, who is present, quietly sewing, steals a look at her family’s friend. Lady Clapperton is as aware as herself of the character and history of Kergouet *père*. Surely now, if ever, she will show some sign of freezing up, or at least shrinking from the implied project of bringing her acquainted with the hopelessly damaged gentleman to whom Marie owes her birth. Country memories for vice and disgrace are long and retentive; witness poor Mrs. Fairfax, unpardoned, unannealed, after ten immaculate years.

There is a second’s pause, when the half-hope of hearing a merited snub dawns shabbily in Lettice’s heart.

“It is a *very* bright spot!” replies the visitor with civil heartiness, and judiciously ignoring “father.” “From what you tell me I am dying to meet her.”

“And so you shall!” cries Marie, in the tone of one conferring a deserved but high favour. “What is more, you shall see her do something. I have always meant to get up a little piece when the children came—we all act, you know, it is in our blood; light high comedy is her line, not farce—and when she once gets an opening you will see that she will be hard to beat.”

Lady Clapperton is sure that she will, and goes away almost as delighted with Mrs. Trent as she is that that lovely alien is not her own daughter-in-law; and with a compunctious inward amuse-

ment—though she is not a woman with a strong sense of the ridiculous—at poor Lettice's glum anguish over her sister-in-law's Green-Room ecstasies.

Miss Trent does not forget at her next meeting with her sweetheart to inquire casually why he has never happened to mention his meetings with Marie by the parochial sick-beds. He gives the kind of answer that she had expected.

"Surely we have enough of her as a topic without her thrusting herself between us when we have the good luck to be alone!"

He speaks with such an air of irritated ennui, turning his head half away, that Lettice hastens to soothe him.

"Thrusting herself between us!" she answers with a little laugh of derision. "I do not think I am much afraid of that."

He changes the topic quickly, and she gladly follows his lead, to that subject whose interest for them both never palls—Chevening's sermon at Swyndford on the 24th. It has frightened the girl to see what a toppling erection the hopes that both of them are building on it, for she has caught the infection of his eagerness, have risen to ere the fateful date is reached.

He is so unnerved when he bids her good-bye before setting off, that she puts all the bracing quality she can into her parting speech.

"Do not think of your audience," she says, with a seriousness that is touched with solemnity; "think only of what you are saying, and—and"—she hesitates perceptibly, for, after all, it is a reversal of their proper *rôles*; and of late the spiritual side

of their relation seems to have suffered some eclipse—"and of whose mouthpiece you are!"

The admonition sounds exquisitely trite in her own ears, but he takes it in good part.

"You are right," he answers, almost humbly. "I know the dangers to which my horribly emotional nature expose me; but as long as I have you beside me in body or in spirit they will not best me!"

She hopes devoutly that it is true, and the wishes and prayers that follow him, as she sits in her usual place at evening service, with the placid, blunt excellence of the vicar's face above her instead of the chiselled eagerness of her lover's, even though they distract her from the good man's theme, will not be reckoned very heavily against her.

The vicar is difficult to listen to, and yet his sermons cannot be said to be unprofitable; their kindness, their humility, their devoutness lend to the listener's wandering thoughts, without their being aware of it, their own colour; and many a one has left Trent church unsuspecting that the good action on which he has resolved, or the ill of which he has repented, are alike due to the influence of the dull preacher who has talked for five and twenty minutes of he could not say what.

"I do not know when I have had such a beautiful sleep," says Marie, in a very wakeful voice, as they all walk swiftly home across the park, through the muffled January evening. "But one cannot quarrel with any one for putting one to sleep when he sends one beautiful dreams. I dreamt that Crawley had given Esmeralda the Juvenile lead."

Chevening is to spend the night following his

sermon at Swyndford, and to meet his betrothed with the least possible delay after his return. She knows the hour at which his train is due, and has calculated to a nicety the necessary extra moments before he can appear. But the margin, which she has been careful to make a liberal one, is exceeded by two hours and more ere they meet. She has tried to persuade herself that the delay is owing to his having so much impressed his hosts that they are loth to part with him. Her first glance at his face tells her that this hypothesis is not the right one.

"Well?"

"Well?"

The utter depression of tone with which he pronounces the monosyllable would be enough answer without the pallor of his look and the nerveless way in which he collapses into the nearest chair. He offers no embrace or even greeting.

"If you take my advice, you will show me the door," he says presently, with a little January laugh. "I am a failure—a *râté*!"

"What!" she cries, recalling the unstrung state in which he had parted from her. "You did not break down?"

"I might have done so, for all it would have mattered."

"I do not understand"—looking bewildered and frightened. "Was the church empty, do you mean?"

"I do not know as to numbers. I never am conscious as to whether I am speaking to many or to few. I only know when there is any one out of whom I can strike a spark."

"And in all that big church there was none?"—
incredulously.

"Not a soul!"

"The Swyndfords themselves?"

She makes the suggestion half shamefacedly, feeling it to be degrading to him and herself to treat such a sacred gift as a bid for a patron's approval.

"I think the duke went to sleep."

"And the duchess?"

"She was not there. She had gone to hear the Bishop of Stepney."

The murder is out! Lettice is conscious of a flashed impression that the catastrophe thus revealed was, in vulgar phrase, "a judgment" on her lover for his selfishness towards the vicar; but she is extremely shocked with herself for a thought so inconsistent with the real thing.

There are a few moments' silence after the blow has fallen. The lovers are, as usual, in the privacy of Lettice's sitting-room, whither—so thin is now the disguise that veils their engagement—the young man is always shown by the servants without any special directions. It is a good, pleasant, useful room, with its air of mingled work and play, and stamped with that exquisite neatness of its owner which of late has tended to become caricatured. It seems as if every fresh laxity introduced by Marie—unintentionally, for she has no ambition to be an innovator—into the rest of the house must be expiated by some fresh rigour of nicety in Lettice's own domain.

The only flaw now in the bower's maidenly perfection is the idol of whom it has of late been the

shrine, and who now—in a prostration almost as complete as Dagon's—lies crumpled and crumpling in one of its spotless chintz chairs.

His betrothed looks at the sufferer for a space with distress in her steady blue eyes, then comes and kneels down beside him. It is well for him that he does not suspect the cause which brings her there. It is a second and stronger impulse of horror at herself for the spasm of contempt that has struck through all her being at his attitude.

Contempt! For him between whom and all other men she has herself set the impassable barrier of her own violent, voluntary kisses; for him whose sustaining and humbly ministering to, in his high career, is to be the one butt and end of existence; for him who, if she does not love him with the one exclusive passion of a lifetime, she must for ever be degraded beneath her own feet in the dust!

Contempt! It is incredible, and yet none the less true, that that one of Love's executioners who perhaps does his work most swiftly and best has touched her on the shoulder. It is, indeed, that very executioner who sends her to his side.

He is lying with his face half hidden on his coat-sleeve, and she touches his arm before she can rouse his attention.

"I think you are taking it too much to heart," she says, her voice all the gentler because of a lurking terror that that horrible new note may have got into it too. "I am afraid"—changing the pronoun into the one that sweetly implies partnership—"that we have gone the wrong way to work."

He sits up rather suddenly, as if something in the

timbre of her voice, soft as it is, had straightened his spine.

"You think," he says, and his eyes have regained their bright falcon look, "that it is wholly and solely the blow to my self-love from which I am suffering. A more perfect sympathy would perhaps have read a worthier motive into my disappointment; but perhaps you are right."

There can be no mistake as to the reproach conveyed. Resentment at his injustice, lined with a still more uncomfortable sense that perhaps it is not injustice, after all, and that he has hit the nail all too truly on the head, keep her proudly silent, and lift her quietly from her knees. If the wounded animal into whose gashes you are pouring your kind medicaments turns round and snaps at you, common prudence recommends you to put yourself out of reach of his bite.

But the mood is short-lived, and the former pang of self-horror displaces it. Is this the way in which she is going to fulfil what is henceforth to be her life-work—the sharing and lightening all the sorrows and burdens that will weigh upon the too sensitive spirit of her Chosen One? What would the *real thing* prompt her to do? To sit down upon the arm of his chair and put her own arm round his neck. Without a blench or a moment's delay she does it.

"We are not going to improve things by quarrelling over them?" she asks with a lightness that does not come easily to her. "What I meant was that I was afraid we had both been building too much upon what we thought was going to be a short cut to—to—our own happiness."

Her proximity improves his spirits, and since she invited the caress she cannot complain of the long straitness of his clasp. But to-day it brings no thrill with it.

"Perhaps we need this discipline of disappointment," she says; and though she still employs the plural pronoun, to her ear the phrase may have a private fitness to her own case.

"Perhaps," he acquiesces heavily.

"And meanwhile"—trying to speak with a bracing light cheerfulness—"we will not go in search of any more 'openings.' When they are good for us—when we are ripe for them—they will come, never fear. And meanwhile"—she has been more successful with him than with herself—"meanwhile"—in a tone and with appropriate action that ought to leave nothing to be desired—"we have each other."

CHAPTER XV

THE expected advent of Mrs. Trent's family, so far from lessening the volume of her correspondence with every member of it, seems, on the contrary, sensibly to have increased its bulk, judging by the time she devotes to it. The candidates for her surgery and the believers in her quack medicines have so increased in the village that her delighted attention to their claims, coupled with her always perfect contempt for time, have made her, if possible, more irregular than ever in her hours. It is, therefore, no surprise to Lettice that—Jim being out shooting—she begins, continues, and finishes her luncheon alone.

She is sipping her coffee afterwards in a very flattened mood, when the sort of loquacious whirl that always heralds Marie's approach announces that her sister-in-law is nigh, and in another moment she stands before her.

Ever since the prodigious uplifting of Mrs. Trent's always high spirits that has followed the actual fixing the day on which the Kergouets are to arrive, Lettice has been conscious of some tentative efforts on Marie's part to conciliate herself. As her own dislike is not in the least lessened, she compounds with her conscience for not responding to advances which, after all, are fitful and dubious,

by pretending that they do not exist. There is nothing dubious, however, to-day about Marie's face and voice. Both express a high degree of friendly indignation.

"I call it a perfect scandal!" she cries, dropping down, with her usual flexible agility, on to the floor at Lettice's feet.

The other regards her with distrustful astonishment.

"And you are not very easily scandalized, either," she answers ungenially.

"I mean, of course, the way in which they have treated him."

A twilight glimmer of understanding, so disagreeable that she refuses to own its existence to herself, steals through a chink into Lettice's mind.

"You forget that I have no idea as to what you are talking about."

Mrs. Trent would be much less quick-witted than she is if she did not perceive the lofty aloofness of the effort to keep her and her sympathy at arms' length, and much less quick-tempered than she is if she did not resent it. There is a change in the strong partisanship of her first key.

"I am talking of Randal Chevening, and the way in which your fine friends have treated him."

It would be difficult to say which clause of this sentence is richest in exasperating power upon its hearer, the familiarity of the "Randal" or the assumption of social inferiority implied in "your fine friends."

Marie has long discovered that to talk of the upper classes as if she did not belong to them is one of the deadliest weapons she possesses against

her sister-in-law; and she would not have taken it out of her armoury now if in her moment of expansion she had not been thrown back.

"Of course, I understand now what you are alluding to," replies Lettice, her fair face rigid with the effort at self-governance; "but even now I cannot imagine how you came to hear it."

"A little bird sang it in my ear," replies the other, with a glint of mirth at her victim's struggles with indignant incredulity—"a little bird who was so full of it that he would have sung it in any one's ear. He walked"—dropping her feathered metaphor—"back across the park with me. I met him in the village, but he would not come in; he was too much upset."

Lettice sits looking straight before her. She cannot sort her emotions yet; only she knows that they are all painful and humiliating, and that the arch Love-slayer, whose first onset she had with horror repulsed this very morning, is working his way to the top. That Randal should have obtruded his jeremiade upon *Marie*—not that she is not always delighted to listen to people's jeremiades—*Marie*, for whom the expressions of his aversion have exceeded the bounds of Christian charity, and driven herself, Lettice, into the unnatural position of Mrs. Trent's defender!

Something in her face—some grey change that for the moment ages and disfigures her—demolishes *Marie*'s not very robust resentment at her rebuke, and brings her back to kindness. This is the more virtuous, as she had several admirable shafts still left in her quiver.

"Those kind of people are all alike," she says in

a tone very evidently meant to be conciliatory. "I think he is uncommonly well out of them. We must all try to cheer him up as much as we can. I will get him to recite something at the Performance."

In a brighter moment Lettice might have felt a certain disdainful amusement at such a remedy for such an ill; but now the picture of her lover mouthing on a stage under Mrs. Trent's instructions puts the finishing touch to her discomfiture. Her countenance expresses as much, and under this second though wordless snub the repressed waspishness breaks out again in Marie's next speech.

"Of course he ought to have more backbone; but if God has not given you as many joints in your spine as other people, why, there you are! I suppose I feel it more strongly from having been used to something so different."

"In whom?" asks Lettice, in a dreadfully polite voice, and with a mental reference—of which her hearer is perfectly and irefully conscious—to the invertebrate humility of Marie's parent.

"In Gabriel—in my brother," replies she with elaborate distinctness, the benevolence quite gone out of her brilliant eyes, and a desperate challenge in its place.

But Lettice does not pick up the glove. *Gabriel!* His parting words are suddenly in her ears, "In happier circumstances we should have been friends." Towards Marie under no circumstances could she ever have felt amity; but with him—yes, it might have been possible.

Mrs. Trent is always as good as her word; in the case of her philanthropic intentions towards the dejected curate she is even better. The prepara-

tions for what Lettice has always qualified both to herself and Chevening as the desecration of the Rachel Hall are already in full swing. The platform whence hitherto only Advocates of the Teapot and Purveyors for the Waif and the Savage have been heard is rapidly being turned into a stage. A temporary Green-Room is beginning to bulge out unbecomingly behind the memorial edifice, and the knocking of the carpenters is loud in the land. It is music in Marie's ears, a music which she insists on every one whom she meets in the village coming in to hear. The vicar, hurrying home to a Confirmation Class; the vicaress, trotting to congratulate or scold a new-made mother; Mrs. Fairfax, stealing past with her deprecating gait;—all are swept in willy-nilly, and ordered to admire, to suggest, to criticize. Not many suggestions, it is true, are made, and still fewer taken; but the fact of having their opinion asked raises the consulted ones' estimate both of themselves and their patroness.

Not even the undisguised disapprobation of Lettice is able to abate the piquant interest taken by Mrs. Taylor in "wings" and "flies," exits and entrances.

"I have always had a taste for the stage, I think," she says, and she has not the grace even to be apologetic; "but I have had very little opportunity for gratifying it."

"Are you going to take a part in the performance?" asks Miss Trent, with not only her lip, but all her other features curling.

"Oh no, of course not!" laughing good-humouredly; "though Mrs. Trent did suggest that

I should prompt. She wants everybody to have a share in the fun; but I should be too nervous, and I should always come in at the wrong place, and I could not rely upon this tiresome head"—touching it reproachfully.

The overflowing joy that sets the doors of Mrs. Trent's heart open to all comers makes her, despite signal previous miscarriages, essay another effort against the impregnable fortress of her sister-in-law's hostility.

"I am afraid you do not quite like these alterations," she says in that off-hand voice which, as Lettice might by this time have learnt, is sometimes the vehicle of some doubtful overture; "but as soon as I can get Jim to build me a *real* little theatre, I will never use this again."

Miss Trent's only answer is to stand, tall and silent, surveying with an unspeakable eye the chaos of planks, laths, chips, before her. She has been forced into the Rachel Hall by Jim, who, having as usual driven Marie down to that scene where most of her life is now spent, intercepts his sister passing by with averted eyes to her Cottage Hospital, and compels her to come in. He is sorry when he has done it, and, what is more, so much frightened by the expression that the first glance at the improvements calls up on Miss Trent's face, that he feigns a summons from one of the workmen outside, and leaves his wife to face the uncubbed lioness whom he has brought her as a playfellow.

Marie is as nearly undaunted as it is possible for a human being to be; but at this moment she is not in the best fighting trim. She has apparently been taking an active part in the carpentering

operations, for she looks hot and flushed. A hammer is in one hand, and a paper of tin-tacks in the other; her garments and hair are thickly powdered with grey dust, and there is a good-sized smouch of whitewash on one cheek.

The extremely expressive silence in which Lettice receives her first would-be conciliatory observation, and the appalling austerity of the look that stalks witheringly round her beloved erections, make even her valiant spirit quail. She steps a pace or two nearer, swinging her hammer nervously, and lowering her sharp voice.

"Jim thinks that she—his mother"—with a very respectful intonation—"would not have minded. He said she liked to see people enjoy themselves."

Miss Trent's lips twitch a little. "It is a point that can scarcely be proved, so it is no use discussing it."

The words perhaps scarcely bear that reading, but none the less do they carry to the hearer's mind the impression that any mention by her of "Jim's mother" is an insult to that departed lady. With a quick change of mood she brings her hammer down with a vicious tap on a bench near her.

"After all, it is only temporary; all this"—waving her bag of tacks theatrically round her—"will disappear, alas! like the baseless fabric of a vision, and when the S. P. G.'s and the G. F. S.'s and the U. E. L.'s come back they will never suspect to what iniquitous uses"—scornfully—"their hall has been put."

Miss Trent stoops to no retort, and a sudden draught, which tells of an opened door behind them, makes a happy diversion by causing both

young women to look round. It is Chevening who has entered.

"Come in," cries Mrs. Trent, allowing her voice to regain its usual pitch, and perfectly regardless of the audience of amused workmen. "You are just in time to see some fur and feathers flying. Which do you back?"

The curate is not very ready with his answer, perhaps because it is a point upon which he cannot decide in a hurry, perhaps because antipathy to its propounder chokes him. He gives her a look that his *fiancée* finds undecipherable as he answers at last—

"I prefer a masterly inaction."

"Now that you are here," Mrs. Trent cries, seized by a new and delightful idea, flying towards the stage and beckoning to him to follow her, "we may as well have a rehearsal of 'Ay, Mate!' You are to stand here, exactly in the middle, just where this knot of wood is, and do not think about 'Mate.' Mate is somewhere in the audience; and you are not to saw the air with your arms; I will show you the right kind of gesture."

"I have recited before, as I told you, at Oxford," replies he, in a rather offended voice, and grudgingly obeying her.

"And you think you know all about it," retorts she, brusque but good-humoured. "Well, all the same, you are going to be coached, and I am going to coach you."

"Not to-day," he answers, averting his look from the little dishevelled beauty gesticulating her commands from the stage above him, and directing it towards the departing alternative, who is in the

act of letting in another draught by letting herself out.

Marie makes no attempt to detain him. On the contrary, she warmly agrees.

"Not to-day, of course. You had better hurry up"—with a glance of understanding amusement and possibly compassion in her eyes, and heaving a sigh. "There are any number of other days between now and Easter, alas!"

Randal *has* to hurry, for the pace with which Lettice is stalking off her indignation is so good as to make the small start in time she had got equivalent to a longer one. But he catches up the flying fair as she turns into the lane off the village street, in which the Cottage Hospital stands.

She turns a face more gracious than his fears had bid him expect towards him.

"How did you know that I was there?"

The infinitesimal delay before he answers, "Instinct, I suppose," undeceives her.

"You did not know it?" she says, not quite so genially.

"No"—rather reluctantly—"to say truth, I did not."

"Then what took you there?"

"What indeed? Idle curiosity, I suppose—the morbid wish to verify how far destruction and bad taste could go."

Her conscience cannot approve the rancour of the reply, nor yet the feeling of soothed satisfaction it gives her.

"What is this 'Ay, Mate,' that Marie was talking about?" rejoins Miss Trent after a moment, in a tone of dignified curiosity.

"Oh, that"—carelessly—"is the name of the thing that she has *ordered* me to recite at *the Performance*"—with a sarcastic accent on the words.

"And you have consented?"

He hesitates. "I dislike her too much to contradict her."

"So you are going to obey her orders?"

He does not enjoy or much admire, as addressed to himself, the tone employed, and there is doggedness mixed with the apology of his reply.

"I thought, and think, that my presence on the stage might raise the tone of the whole show; and it is a fine thing—a very fine thing—very dramatic."

There is undoubted hankering in the tone of his plea, and she falls ruminatively silent. A sort of *tu quoque* from her lover recalls her.

"I was surprised—more than surprised—to meet *you* at the hall. What, in the name of all improbability, took *you* there?"

"Jim caught me as I was going by, and made a point of it. He has always been very good to me."

The final statement sounds irrelevant and flat in Chevening's ears, and his speaking features express as much.

"I was exceedingly touched this morning. He met me on the stairs and said, 'Old Grant has had a second stroke. No one ever survives a third.'"

"Why on earth were you touched at that?"

"Appleton, of which Mr. Grant is rector, is in Jim's gift."

"Oh!"

"It was his way of conveying to me—you know

he always hates explanations—that he recognized—that he did not wish any longer to oppose——”

She stops, with a vague chill shrinking from the riveting word with which her sentence was to have ended. He lifts his straight brows.

“Do you extract all that out of one fit?”

“There have been other indications,” she says, wincing a little under the light sarcasm of his tone. “Straws show which way the wind blows. He has often said lately that ‘It is astonishing how one’s point of view changes,’ and that ‘One must let people be happy in their own way.’”

Randal breaks into a bitter little laugh. “He has chosen a strange way himself.”

“Yes, yes,” she answers, for once impatient of his flattery; “but do not let us go over that again. I want to tell you about Appleton. It is in the very, *very* heart of the country, an entirely rural population. It can hardly come under the head of an ‘opening;’ but will you take it if he offers it to you?”

They have reached the door of the Cottage Hospital. The lane in which it stands is deep in the mud of a clay soil and of February fill dyke; but a belated snow wreath still lies under the north hedge that faces it. Chevening’s eyes are fixed upon it.

“I have done with ‘openings,’” he says gloomily. “With you beside me, what does it matter where I am?”

His look leaves the snow-patch and seeks hers, which for the moment is almost as cold. A moment later he adds, contradictorily and with violence—

"I would give anything in the world to get away from here; but"—with a smile that is less spontaneous than produced to meet the surprise in her face—"we must wait for the third stroke."

Mrs. Trent's over-eagerness in the preparations to celebrate her family's advent results in the fact that the theatre, with its adjuncts, stands complete in tantalizing perfection while yet Lent stretches, immense and meagre, between her and her goal. To bridge the gulf in some degree she whisks Jim off to London, for the double purpose of buying properties and hunting up recruits.

The problem of deciding upon what the play is to be has been found so insoluble, owing to the dispersion of the intending actors and the hopeless differences of their opinions as voluminously conveyed by post, that a change in the programme has been found necessary. The idea of a regular drama has been given up, and a "Varieties Entertainment," which will give opportunities for the gem of the Kergouet talent to display every and all of its facets, is substituted.

Whether "Ay, Mate," is to be hitched into a place amid the heterogeneous display Lettice does not stoop to inquire. A great stillness falls upon the house when its noisy little mistress is temporarily withdrawn.

"Is not it like heaven—I mean the peace and silence?" asks Lettice of her lover, as she hands him his cup of tea in the morning-room as of old.

As of old, the sacred chairs stand in their hallowed ugliness, unoccupied and well in evidence; as of old, the bright-cheeked Hoppner ancestress smiles white-snooded from above the

Adams chimneypiece, the parrot makes a sleepy noise with his beak under his light covering, and Miss Kirstie, muzzleless—but that she has been for some time past, ever since she made up her sensible Scotch mind that Lulu is an evil that must be endured—sitting in prick-eared expectation of her national short-bread.

“I have made the housemaid collect all those detestable acting editions and sweep them off——”

“Into the dust-hole?”

“No, into Marie’s boudoir. Oh, never fear, they will emerge again soon enough.” After a pause, “It seems incredible that I could ever have been fond of play.”

“As Jim says, one’s point of view changes,” he answers dryly.

But after a day or two—a day or two of depressed restlessness which she cannot explain—the wave of peace seems to flow over him too. They fall insensibly back into their old ways. Browning reappears on the scene; Marcus Aurelius; even Thomas à Kempis has a turn. Once again she can resume her disciplodom, and look up, an attitude for which of late she has seemed to have little need.

Lettice might think that the pre-deluge, pre-Marie, pre-engagement period had returned, but for an all-important difference. She tries to tell herself that that difference is for the better; tries to lash herself up to some measure of the ardour that had inspired her first abandonment. But even the memory of it seems to have grown irrecoverably faint. She succeeds in deceiving herself even less than she does him; and that that is but

indifferently is proved by his repeated reproaches to her for her unresponsiveness, her passiveness. It is the worst that he can accuse her of, since she never resists. Tired, at last, of his upbraidings, she defends herself.

"I do not think you have much to complain of," she says, stooping her burning face under what feels a weight of shame at her own duplicity.

Her speech at least stems the torrent of his complaints, and brings a startling change into his key.

"Shall I ever forget the divine surprise of that moment!" he exclaims, in a tone of rapt reminiscence. "You who had always been so stand-off, my snowflake, my icicle! After that I knew I was safe; that you were mine through all eternity. With a woman like you, I knew what it implied—what it must have cost you! I knew that for me it was the real thing."

The real thing! Her own phrase, whose corners have been rubbed off with incessant use. Then it must be so. It must be the real thing. But if so, what *can* the mock thing be like?

CHAPTER XVI

THE Kergouets have arrived. The Lent, which must surely this year have had a hundred and forty instead of forty days in it, has run its lean race at last, and Easter has blown the expected Argosy into happy Mrs. Trent's port by the breath of an east wind—fittest breeze in Lettice's opinion, as being most disagreeable.

Although two unexceptionable and well-turned-out carriages go to meet them, there is something in their arrival that irresistibly reminds one of a circus.

Marie herself drives Esmeralda in her pony-cart, and flourishes up to the door twirling her white whip in triumph like a mop, and singing "See the Conquering Hero comes" at the top of her voice.

The omnibus follows, with Sybil driving, Jim sitting beside her, to avert the certain catastrophe which her startling method of taking corners and shaving gate-posts must otherwise entail. On the roof behind these are Muriel and the two boys; Louis, pale with nervousness, clinging to the rail, and being grossly insulted by his sister for his pusillanimity. Inside, the profile of Kergouet *père* is visible, civil and drooping, apologizing by its expression to the coachman for having been turned off his box, and to the footman for intruding on his privacy.

From her sitting-room window an observer whose delicacy has prevented her from forcing herself on the first raptures of the arrival notes these phenomena. Presently that observer's eyes cease to serve her, since the pageant fades, but then her ears come into play. Large and thick as the house is, its silence is abolished. The rout seems in every portion of it at once. Of course, they can bear no delay in verifying their ungodly gains—Marie's achievement. She has never hitherto seemed particularly elated by it, as the listener must grudgingly own, but now she can evidently not bear to delay for a moment the exhibition of it.

Yet no; they are not giving her the trouble of showing it to them, they are showing it to themselves. Peals of laughter, galloping feet, doors opened and banged in a way that is new, and must be offensive to their dignified mahoganyhood; the cry of joy of the discoverer, and the whine of the cuffed.

By-and-by the increased clamour tells Miss Trent that the excursionists have invaded her passage. Presently feet and voices reach her door, which, after a slight pause and the sound of an ineffectual remonstrance, opens wide, and reveals in the aperture the good-looking bold face and figure of Sybil, with her family echeloned behind her.

"I told her to knock," says Esmeralda, in smiling apology, which yet she evidently thinks quite needless, and advancing with outstretched hand, in her usual happy confidence of giving and receiving pleasure.

Esmeralda's eyes are generously blacked, and nothing can be smarter or more towny than she

in her plenitude of white furs and white satin garnitures.

Lettice shakes the offered hand and several others, thinking herself fortunate in eluding all the intended kisses except little Frank's.

"I am so glad to find you here," says the actress, genially. "It was impossible to speak two connected words to any one at the wedding"—with a little shrill laugh. "We are seeing the house. How splendid it is!—quite one of the 'Stately Homes of England.'"

Marie is standing on the threshold; she never enters her sister-in-law's domain, nor with her will would her family have now done so. Is it fancy, or is it possible that she can have become so un-Kergouetted as to wince slightly at her sister's phrase?

"Come," she cries with a little accent of curt command, "out with you! If we spend so much time on the house, when are we to get to the theatre?"

The magic words act like a spell. Muriel drops the photograph she is handling, and Sybil ceases making the mysteriously infuriating noises which causes Miss Kirstie, with bristled back and volleyed barks, to ask herself whether, contrary to all experience and precedent, a telegraph boy can be in the room?

They are gone, but not before the father of the flock has slidden a hesitating apology across the door-mat.

"These terrible children of mine! You must think——"

But before he can proceed further his married

daughter has hooked her arm in his and cantered him off.

Soon after that silence settles down again. They must have snatched tea in their usual Pass-over fashion, for in half an hour the pony-cart has come round again, and borne away Marie and Esmeralda, while, guided by Jim, the rest of the party, questioning, exclaiming, racing one another along the church path, set off for no doubtful goal.

They are very very late in returning, Mrs. Trent having entirely forgotten that she had invited the vicar and Mrs. Taylor to dinner, and it is nearly nine o'clock before the last laggard has reached the dining-room. Can there be one missing still, or has the butler miscalculated? For whom is the vacant place, instinctively avoided, beside Lettice?

She does not spend much thought on it, her attention being divided between throwing cold water upon Mrs. Taylor's *sotto voce* ecstasies and covertly watching Randal and his method of dealing with Esmeralda. It is a surprise to his betrothed to see him. She had not known that he was coming. Is he drawing the little embodied volubility beside him out in sarcastic amusement—not that Miss Poppy Delafield ever needs much drawing—or is it merely disapproving endurance that looks out of the eyes continually passing in hostile comparison between the dazzling original at the head of the table and its ludicrous little caricature at his side?

"She looks professional," says Mrs. Taylor, whose gaze has been wending with intense interest from one to another of the strangers, and though the adjective may sound equivocal, the tone in

which it is pronounced clearly shows that it is meant to be complimentary. "I suppose they must always touch up a bit, even in private life."

"I suppose so."

"Does the little boy always dine as late as this? Isn't it very bad for him?"

"I am sure I do not know"—rather impatiently. "I suppose he always did at the foreign hotels they——"

Her sentence is never finished, cut off close by the knife of a surprise. There is a stir in the room; some one has entered, and most people are bounding off their chairs and racing each other to surround and embrace him. In a moment only the Taylors, Chevening, and Lettice are left seated.

"Who is it?" asks the vicaress, in a whisper made loud by excitement, not of Jim—he has joined the gay throng of welcomers—but of his sister.

The latter answers vaguely, "I—do not know." Then chiding herself back into sense, "What am I saying? It is Marie's eldest brother."

The hubbub ends at last in the new arrival being allowed to go and change his dress, and the elated juveniles ordered back to their seats by Marie.

Miss Trent's eyes are returning from the door to which they have escorted one from whom his enveloping family have entirely hidden her when they meet in pure accident those of her betrothed. The latter are examining her with an expression of acute surprise, mingled with what can't be, yet looks like, acute displeasure.

Dessert is reached before the wayfarer reappears,

restored to the level of the rest of the world by a bath and a tail-coat.

Marie has had a place set for him beside herself, and something not unlike Mr. Chevening's unaccountable expression darkens her blazing sunshine when the young man, quietly ignoring the fact, drops into the seat which has been vacant all through dinner beside Lettice.

Nothing can be more colourlessly courteous than his greeting; and yet after it the girl knows that, despite the Wall of China which his family had built round him, he had been aware of her all along.

Several moments are spent in vociferous insistencies on the part of the hostess that he shall eat the dinner which has been brought back for him, and equally resolute, though calmer, assurances on his part that he will not, having already dined in the train.

"Is that true?"

This is Miss Trent's conversational opening, which she did not find in any book. Her voice is not quite so coldly assured as it usually is when adapted to the use of Marie's family; but the consciousness that two pairs of hostile eyes are fixed upon her gives it a slight tremor. That Marie should be annoyed by her brother preferring Lettice's neighbourhood to her own fills the former with a not quite Christian pleasure; but that Chevening should be assuming silly proprietary scowls is simply and unadulteratedly annoying.

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"It sets one at such a disadvantage to be eating soup when other people are eating sweetmeats, that I thought you might prefer the pangs of hunger."

He shakes his head, inwardly congratulating himself that no vulgar claims of beef or mutton need lessen the number of looks that he may count out to himself at the high perfection beside him. How incompletely—though he has thought of so little else since they parted—has he remembered her! The breeding, the pride, the exquisite grooming,—memory has understated them all.

Since her connection with the Kergouet family Miss Trent has adopted a style of even severer simplicity than before; and to-night she is dressed in the very gown, or its fac-simile, that had once awed Chevening with its note of rigid virginity. Snowdrops are over, so in that respect there is a falling off; for the lilies-of-the-valley that replace them at her breast, though pure, are not cold.

Though it is accident that has placed her opposite Esmeralda, choice could not have served her better for the enhancing by contrast of her lofty charms; and as Gabriel answers with gentle brotherliness the stagily affectionate inquiries and ejaculations shot across the flowers at him, some door in his heart seems to shut with a hopeless clang.

"You must be surprised to find me still here," says the cold, low voice beside him, when Esmeralda's little shrieks allow it to make itself heard again, "after all my asseverations to the contrary; but, perhaps, you have forgotten that I did asseverate."

"No, I have not forgotten."

"I fully meant them at the time; but afterwards—soon afterwards—circumstances occurred—it seemed hardly worth while to make any change."

She does not herself comprehend what drives her to this oblique confession, only that the need is there. He is so long in rejoining that she looks up half angrily at him. Ought he not to be highly flattered by her admitting him even over the threshold of her confidence? She finds his eyes riveted upon Chevening, who for the moment has released them from his surveillance, and is answering in a sulky voice some rowdy joke thrown at him out of her abundance by Marie.

Gabriel's dark head veers slowly round. "It is *he?*"

"Yes."

A pause.

"Does he still think you wanting in imagination?"

She gives a slight start. "You remember that too?"

"I remember that too."

His tone makes her vaguely uneasy. She harks back to his question.

"Why shouldn't he? How can any change in our relations alter my deficiencies?"

There is no answer. Gabriel has returned to his scrutiny.

"It is to be *soon?*"

"I—I hope so."

Her lips quiver as she frames the lie. But it is for his good.

"I hope you will be very happy."

He is taking it just as he should; yet the calm goodwill, which an iron effort has driven into his face and voice, makes her illogically dissatisfied.

"*Very* happy?" she echoes, raising the thin gold-brown line of her eyebrows. "Who is *that*?"

As if in reply to her question a peal of laughter from Marie, in which Jim's voice, with that new jollity that the last few months have put into it joins, rings out. There comes a fraternal smile into Gabriel's grave eyes.

"Aren't you answered?"

"Am I?"—cavillingly.

"You told me that I need not be afraid of your spoiling her life?"

"I told you so because I thought I should not have the chance—because I thought I was going away," she answers, in haste to shake off the encomium which she is conscious of so little meriting. "If I have not spoilt her life, well"—with a nervous laugh—"perhaps it has not been for want of trying."

She knows his face too little to decide whether this is news that she is telling him. It would certainly be better taste not to inquire; and she has always piqued herself upon her discretion, yet—

"Has not Marie told you how badly we have got on?"

It needs no narrow inspection to see that he hesitates.

"I have seen her so seldom."

"She might have written it."

"She might."

"And hasn't she?"

The answer comes pointed by a direct look that seems pregnant with reproach.

"Since she married she has never once mentioned your name to me."

The full weight of her own bad taste pulls Miss Trent's chin down on her neck, from which, because the Kergouet necks are encumbered with beads, even its customary string of real pearls is absent.

"It is right that she should excel me in generosity as in everything else," the girl murmurs bitterly.

He does not at once rejoin, sitting silently back in his chair. She thinks that it is a just indignation that checks his speech. In point of fact, he feels that if he let himself utter at all, he will have to tell her that earth has never shown him anything fairer than the little *cheveux follets*—carefully restrained from being too *follets*—on the warm nape of her stately neck.

When he has at last convinced his lips that such expression is impossible, they consent to say—

"And has she spoilt your life too?"

The relief of for once speaking out her true mind is too intense for Lettice to realize the exquisite unseemliness of choosing her present hearer as confidant. Her eyes throw out sparks.

"Absolutely!"

With this pleasant adverb she leaves him.

When Miss Trent joins the little group of intertwined sisters and young brothers by the drawing-room fire she finds Esmeralda firing off eager questions as to the name and nature of her late neighbour at dinner.

"If it had not been for his waistcoat I should have felt sure that he was on the stage. He has such an actor's face!"

"He is not an actor," replies Marie, seizing as

she speaks Sybil's fingers, and extracting from them the cigarette which that young creature had just filched from the florid cigarette-box; "he is a curate—Mr. Taylor's curate—isn't he, Mrs. Taylor?—curate of Trent; but he will not always be so."

The last clause is given with a faint but unmistakable imitation of Chevening's voice and manner, which reveals to his betrothed that she has not had a monopoly of his confidences as to his future greatness, but has shared them with the woman for whom he has always professed so deep-rooted a dislike.

"He would make a good lover," continues Esmeralda, with professional zest. "We are rather short of lovers just now. From the look of him, I should think he could take Martin Hervey's parts; don't you think so?"—turning with the civil impulse to include her in the talk to Lettice.

The confused haste with which the latter changes the subject brightens the twinkle in Marie's eye which her own malice and Esmeralda's innocent blundering have lit there.

The latter gabbles on in happy ignorance, delighted with the sound of her own voice, with her handsome surroundings, and with hearers whom she is as sure of pleasing as of being pleased with.

"How did you think Gabriel looking?" she asks, again pointedly addressing Lettice, with a good-hearted wish that the ex-mistress of the house shall not feel out of it. "Did you know he was coming? You seemed so surprised. Mr. Chevening—is that his name?—asked me why you looked as if you had seen a ghost."

"I did not know that he was expected; Marie had not mentioned it."

"Hadn't I?"—nonchalantly. "I suppose I thought it would not interest you much."

Esmeralda breaks into a laugh. "Oh, that is not fair, is it? But how did you think him looking?"

"I am afraid I did not think about it"—in amiable tit-for-tat response to Marie's mimicry. Then, with a faint compunction and an air of forced interest, "Has he been ill?"

"Not *ill*—no; he would kill me for saying he was ill. He will never allow he is ill; only horribly overworked. A bank is sad bondage, particularly when you hate sitting on a high stool as much as he does. He only took to it"—turning to Mrs. Taylor with the usual expansive candour of her family as to their private affairs—"because he could not bear to be a burden on father, and there did not seem to be any other opening. Wasn't it beautiful of him?"

Mrs. Taylor's cordial "It was indeed!" is scarcely needed to set the happy little actress off again.

"What has pulled him down now so much—don't you think that he looks pulled down?—is that he has been nursing father through what we all think must have been influenza. He did not breathe a word of it to any of us, because he knew what a state we should have been in. Wasn't it unselfish of him? But it must have been influenza! He had just the same symptoms as Tiny Villiers. How do you think father looking? Oh, you have never seen him before. How do *you* think him looking?"—appealing to Lettice.

Miss Trent is spared yielding, as it is to be hoped that she would not have done, to the temptation of hinting that the subject is one upon which neither her eyes nor thoughts would deign to employ themselves, by the interruption of piercing shrieks of laughter from a distant part of the room, which the children in their pilgrimage of investigation have lately reached.

"What have they got hold of now?" cries Marie, who has hitherto been puffing away in unusual silence, whipping as she speaks her feet off the head of the fire-dog on which they have been resting, and flying to the scene of action. "Oh"—beginning to laugh a little too, but taking the object of ridicule out of her juniors' hands—"it is poor old Lady Clapperton's photograph in her Drawing-Room gown."

The young ones, much above themselves, try to snatch it back, shouting—

"Oh, do let me have another look! What a neck she has got—like a giraffe; and such a smart frock! Isn't it just like the coronation robes Miss Wilson wore in *Henry the Eighth*?"

"A giraffe in coronation robes!" They all catch up the phrase, and repeat it with volleys of derisive amusement; even little Frank lisping it as well as he can after his betters. But Marie gets tired of the joke.

"Come, that is enough. She is a good old sort, and I will not have her made fun of any more."

And when Marie speaks in that tone they know that she means it. Their subsiding mirth coincides with the entry of the men.

The vicar, as always when he can't sink into a

seat beside his wife, makes for Miss Trent, but his curate, having younger legs and a better right to the post, outstrides him, and occupies it.

"Which of you has been so amusing?" he asks, sitting down in front of her so as to hide her from the rest of the party, and with a decisive air of monopoly which she could have spared. "Have the Kergouet family been treating you already to a taste of their professional gifts?"

"They have been sharpening their Green-Room wit upon dear Lady Clapperton," she answers; and he notices that her face is still discoloured by some strong and recent emotion.

"And the new-comer—the first walking gentleman? Is he worthy of his family?"

There are pleasanter angles for conversation than when a person sits down bang opposite to you, and, with elbows on knees and hands gripping his face, favours you with a sight of the whites of his eyes.

Lettice changes her attitude slightly. "You will be able to judge for yourself."

"Why did you look so taken aback when he came into the dining-room?"

"I am not aware that I did."

Her tone of chill displeasure ought to have warned him that he has gone far enough. On the contrary, it excites him to a further display of un-wisdom.

"Then why did you change colour?"

She gets up. "If this catechism has any meaning at all, it is an insult!"

Her move, if any one is at leisure to notice it, may seem motivated by the fact that Muriel has pro-

duced a phonograph, and is inviting every one to speak down it. Lettice joins the group gathered round the exhibitor in time to see the vicar in the throes of a hopeless struggle to find something to say, every idea vanishing when invoked. He has finally to be prompted by his wife to a flat aspiration that there may be a moon on the night of the theatrical performance.

Mrs. Taylor follows with a larky one for an annual repetition of the gaiety, and each person in turn pumps up a platitude or a flippancy, according to their different natures—alike only in the invariable difficulty of conception. The machine has apparently the same palsying effect as an ear-trumpet. Even the Kergouet fluency is congealed, and with the melancholy, Frenchified Louis the family invention runs absolutely dry. He tries to retire from the arena, but is kept there by the pinching grip of a sister on each side.

"Do not be a fool!" cries Sybil, holding his close-cropped head down to the trumpet. "Say something—anything. Come, I'll tell you what to say"—bursting out laughing. "Say Lady Clapperton is a giraffe in coronation robes!"

There is nothing that, in the position he at present occupies, Louis Kergouet would not say, nor does he see anything objectionable in the utterance. He at once complies.

"Lady Clapperton is a giraffe in coronation robes," he says as distinctly as he can, and with a strong French accent.

CHAPTER XVII

"WHAT are they up to now? Who is Lady Clapperton?"

Miss Trent, turning an indignant back upon the scene of ribaldry, finds herself face to face with Gabriel, who, having been finishing his cigar in Jim's company, has only just entered the room. There is the well-founded anxiety of one all too versed in his family's capabilities in the young man's tone.

"Lady Clapperton is my oldest friend," replies Lettice, pregnantly.

He has time for a flashed thought of how infinitely wrath becomes her; of how different its ensigns are in her to what they are in his own vociferous, gesticulating crew, before, with an inarticulate sound of annoyance, he hurls himself upon the criminals. All four have made a penitential exit bedwards before he returns.

He finds Miss Trent seated on an old-fashioned round ottoman, with either side undefended. Her owner is not in sight, and he can read no prohibition in the grateful blue gaze she lifts to him.

"You have sent them to bed?"

"I have sent them out of the room. Far be it from me to presume to say that I have sent them to bed. They never go to bed."

"Marie never goes to bed," rejoins Lettice, gloomily.

Both ruminate in silence upon this awful statement for a moment, then Lettice says—

"Perhaps you now begin to understand what I meant when I told you that my life is absolutely spoilt."

The conclusion is a monstrously exaggerated one to draw from such premises; even he, lost as he is in the stupefaction of his wonder at that astonishing finish to which all the beauty to which he is accustomed seems mere sluttiness, shows some protest in his countenance, though his tongue utters none.

"I have no intention of calling upon you for sympathy," she says, with that dim sense of being in the wrong which is always upsetting to the temper. "Under the circumstances, it would be an absurd anomaly that you should show me any. I, merely in self-defence, state the fact, in answer to your inquiries—I should not, if you had not asked me, as you did at dinner—that my whole existence now is a ceaseless process of being rubbed the wrong way."

It is an evening of comparisons. At the dinner, to which she has just alluded, Miss Trent had wasted many moments in watching the cynical travel of her *fiancé's* eyes from Esmeralda to Marie and back again. She feels that Gabriel is instituting a like comparison between herself and the little "strayed reveller," who is looking more Bohemian than ever with a fool's cap out of a cracker on her head—a waggish parting token from little Frank.

"There is nothing more deteriorating to the

character," she goes on, still with that chafed sense of her own bad taste lending defiance to her voice. "Do you think that I am not aware that I have deteriorated? If I had not, should I be now talking in this way to you?"

The question might seem a dangerous one, in the opening it affords for fervid contradiction; but Lettice has a not ill-placed confidence in her man. No touchiest pride could extract a compliment out of his answer.

"You spoke in much the same tone when last we met."

"Thank you," she says, with an angry, low laugh. "I understand the implication. I have not deteriorated because it was impossible."

He receives this foolish utterance in silence; not, as she imagines, out of wisdom, but because if he speaks he knows he must say, "Go on being angry; go on talking nonsense; and let me go on looking at you. I ask nothing better."

"You told me that it would come all right," she resumes, in that key of anger—soft-spoken, refined, but acute—that seems to lay the blame of her miscarriage at his door.

"Did I?" he answers. "Yes, I believe I did. But then I was acquainted with only one of the factors in the case. I knew Marie, but I did not know you. I reckoned without my host."

The words are needlessly, oddly harsh, and Miss Trent's cup runs over. She cannot guess that his only alternative from implying that she is a virago is to fall at her feet. And this is the ingrate to whom she had, with such considerate delicacy, broken the fact of her approaching marriage!

"I understand," she answers in a deeply wounded tone. "It is the same with every one. The two conventional figures pitted against each other, the innocent, suffering, injured angel and the malevolent fiend. All the appreciation, all the allowances, all the sympathy for her, while for me——" Her voice snaps off short.

A pause.

"Is there none for you?"

"None."

He waits a moment or two till he can feel himself pretty well in hand, yet his words flock out at last in a good deal less measured march than he had intended.

"You are wrong. When I see you here surrounded by us, I can quite understand how you are counting the moments till your release."

She gives a slight start, and flashes a searchlight upon him to see whether he has any *arrière pensée* in his words. But a glance assures her to the contrary. *Counting the moments till her release!* He who can credit her with that is no conjurer.

* * * * *

It is a gay cavalcade that enters Trent church next morning, really not very long after the bell has ceased. The Kergouets are generally not strong in church-going, less from intentional neglect than from an innate inability to be ever ready in time for anything. But to-day excitement and curiosity have torn them out of bed at an unheard-of hour, have sent the four children expatiating about the gardens and stables while the April sun is still in his infancy, and are now driving them,

clad in their liveliest clothes—and that is saying a good deal—up the aisle of Trent church.

The eyebrows of his family express an undisguised surprise at finding their elder brother already there, the only other occupant of the pew being Lettice. He and she are at opposite ends of it. The embryo disposition shown by the young ones to scuffle for the seat next Gabriel is immediately quelled by him, as is the superfluous rustling and fidgeting with which their opening devotions are accompanied.

Glory has its drawbacks, and the distinction of occupying the front seats is perhaps dearly bought by the inability to see any member of the congregation except Mrs. Taylor, who, by being parallel, is sidelongly visible; but, having been seen, gauged, and found wanting overnight, is a poor substitute for the hats and faces tantalizingly guessed at behind.

There is in compensation, indeed, a near and admirable view of the officiating clergy, the noun in this case becoming virtually a singular one, since the vicar receives about as much attention as his spouse. There is also a good deal of interesting reading on the seventeenth and eighteenth century monuments in the chancel, and more recondite study of the early English sentence that runs below the stained window to the late Mr. Trent's memory overhead.

Mr. Trent's daughter has resolved that her Sunday quiet and Sunday charity shall not be tested by witnessing the entry of the group of "strolling players" with whom Fate has connected her. She

has to this end set off earlier than her wont, but she cannot quite escape the family.

As she issues from the side door she sees the elder Kergouet and his son pacing slowly ahead of her in the aimless enjoyment of cigarettes, fresh air, and loafing. The parent is leaning on Gabriel's arm, and there is an indefinable air of friendship and good understanding about both their backs.

At the sound made by the door clanging behind Lettice both men turn, and after a moment's hesitation, during which the elder drops his son's arm and a frightened look creeps over his face, they come forward to meet her.

"You are, like us, tempted out by the beauty of the morning," says Mr. Kergouet—he has long dropped that military prefix, which can have nothing but disagreeable associations for him—speaking with uneasy elaborateness. "We are revelling in the purity of your air. Oh"—with a nervous glance that takes in the Sundayness of her *tout ensemble*—"I see that you are on your way to church. Might we be allowed to accompany you part of the way?"

There is nothing that Miss Trent wishes less than to be seen entering or approaching her parish church under the convoy thus offered; yet she answers civilly enough—

"Certainly, if you feel inclined. It is rather a pretty walk across the park."

Once before has she seen the same look of mixed apprehension, command, and entreaty in Gabriel's dark eyes; then, as now, she had obeyed it. Her virtue has its reward.

"I am not going to have you on my hands

again," says the young man, in a tone of protecting caressingness which takes all roughness out of the words. "At this rate you will knock yourself up before the day is half over. You had better take it easy, and"—with a flashed glance at her—"I am sure Miss Trent will excuse you."

Miss Trent tries not to put too much willingness into her endorsement of this dismissal; and Mr. Kergouet's is, perhaps, not an inferior effort to disguise his relief as he sets off homewards.

Gabriel lingers. "May I walk a few yards with you? or would you rather I did not?"

She must make some assenting motion with head or hand, for the next minute they are stepping it side by side towards the as yet silent church tower. Neither utters at first. Speech lends itself better to complaint or aspiration than to the expression of still well-being.

With the man, at least, to-day it is deeply well—in the possession of this to-day, that has scarcely a yesterday, and certainly not a to-morrow. To-morrow, as yesterday, there will be the meagre life of self-repression and self-sacrifice, the life of warding off pain from and concocting pleasures for others. To-day there is the clear blue ether, the glazed buttercups, the pushing verdure impatient of sheath and calyx, the sunshiny aloneness with the woman loved,—all, not for somebody else, but for *him!*

To her he leaves it to break the charm of that bright silence, which in a *tête-à-tête* spells intimacy.

"You think me a very great shrew. You are always expecting me to insult some one."

She says it half upbraidingly, yet as one whose conscience is not absolutely clear.

"Do you mean that I was afraid you were going to snub my father?" he answers, with a direct response to her thought that she finds embarrassing.

"Ye-es."

His momentary pause shows her how true had been her intuition.

"I thought that you probably did not realize how weak his spirits always are, and how ill he has been."

A rather rueful tenderness pierces through a tone meant to be wholly matter-of-fact; and Lettice's cheek burns at having obtained as well as merited the oblique reproach which she had asked for. It is never too late to mend. She will sit by Mr. Kergouet at luncheon, offer him pine lozenges for his cough, and try to pay him compliments as flat as his own. It is in this meritorious frame of mind that Miss Trent nears the church, now flinging the poignant gladness—ineradicably sad—of its Easter bells over the heads of the gathering flock.

The gate in the park palings, which opened will make her one of them, is reached, and Lettice pauses.

"Are you coming to church?" she asks.

It never occurs to him—so much, at least, of the Kergouet remains—that the weekdayness of his clothes can breed the dissuasion he suspects in her eyes.

"Mayn't I?"

"It is not my house that I should give or refuse you leave to enter," she answers, with that half-

priggish gravity which he thinks so beautiful; while an earnest hope that Randal may be putting the finishing touches to his sermon or be already safely boxed up in the vestry crosses her perturbed mind.

She had not seen Chevening again after their brush on the previous evening; he had apparently been too much upset by it to remain till the break-up of the party, and must have gone home in a frame of mind which she does not care to dwell upon.

Throughout the service she is haunted by an odious fear that he may be going to preach at her again. The telling herself that it will be difficult to drag invective and reproach into the joy and exultation that befits an Easter Day discourse is the only thing that supports her at all; and it is with a feeling of long-breathed relief that she finds herself safely in the church porch without having had her ears wounded by one sentence that could have any possible application to herself or to their quarrel.

"What a splendid sermon!" cries Esmeralda, as the prism-coloured party from the Hall re-enter the park, followed by the overt admiration of the schoolchildren, and the more covert, but not less acute, interest of the adults. "And how wonderfully good his business is—I mean"—correcting herself—"his action, his gestures. He must have had lessons from an actor, I am sure, hasn't he?"

"Has he?" asks Marie, tossing the question lightly on to the preacher's owner.

"Not that I know of. I certainly hope not," replies she, hastily. Then, conscious that Gabriel

is too near for her to be able to snub his family comfortably, she adds, "I mean the two professions are so different, that what would be suitable for the one would be most inappropriate to the other."

"Of course, of course," returns Esmeralda, dimly aware that she has said the wrong thing, and in an amiable hurry to repair it; "but it is not only his action that I admired. He is so wonderfully eloquent—says such beautiful, touching things."

"We have had nothing but brimstone all through Lent," says Marie, with that glint in her eye which Lettice has learnt to know as always accompanying a reprisal of some sort, and which she now recognizes as the tit-for-tat of her own hit at the stage. "The swells have been getting it so hot that it is a thousand pities none of them were there to hear it, unless you count us."

She laughs, as if there was something inherently ridiculous in the idea of the Trent household coming under the category indicated, and her family innocently join. The shaft has been well planted.

It has been impossible to Lettice not to be aware that the extreme virulence of Chevening's Lent denunciations of the rich and great—their surface benevolence, their real selfishness, their dram-drinking philanthropy and their profound callousness—has dated from his own rebuff at Swyndford; nor has his discourse to-day, though in a quite different vein, pleased her better. It has sounded in her ears unreal, shallow, sugary. She tries to drop a little behind in order to chew the cud of the bitter wonder whether it is in herself rather than in the style of her lover's oratory that the change lies, but Esmeralda defeats her intention. The good-

hearted little creature sees that something has drawn a plait on Miss Trent's white forehead, and she sets her simple wits to remove it.

"You do not know what a pleasure it is to us all to see the wonderful way in which Marie has taken to her new life. I really think she has not a regret. It shows how good you have all been to her. Tiny Villiers said, 'She'll never stand it; she'll be back in six months.' I shall write and tell her what a mistake she has made."

The speaker pauses, as if expecting some sign of approval; but as none comes she flows on happily, her mind as unable to keep for two minutes off its habitual track as the dyer's hand to lay aside its indigo.

"What a beautiful place for a pastoral play this would be—really far better than Combe Wood. The orchestra might be hidden away there among the trees, and that dip in the ground, with the banks rising gently round it like an amphitheatre, seems made for the audience. Oh, Mr. Chevening, I never saw you coming! We were just discussing your sermon. Aren't you dying to know what we said about it?"

She shoots a look of stage coquetry at him out of her blacked but harmless eyes, and then, having been evidently posted as to the state of affairs, trips off to join the others.

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"What that little marionette said about your discussing my sermon."

Lettice is looking straight before her. If Randal has forgotten his overnight crime, she has not.

"Miss Kergouet was expressing her great admiration for it."

"And Miss Trent?"

"There was no need, no room for me to say anything."

"And is there no need *now*," he asks almost indignantly—"now to tell me what I am thirsting to hear, that the lapse of sympathy which I have felt between us all through Lent is exchanged for that oneness of thought and aspiration which we once shared?"

"Do you mean," she answers dryly, "did I like your sermon?" Then, as he is too much taken aback to respond, "Judging from your last night's implication, you cannot think my opinion upon it worth having."

It gives her no pleasure to quarrel with him, as it would were she in love; but she owes it to herself—a phrase which people invariably employ when they wish with a clear conscience to be disagreeable to their acquaintances—not to let his insult pass unnoticed.

"Is it possible that you are still resenting that wretched little spurt of irritation?" he asks in angry wonder. "Was it worth a second thought, much less a whole night's brooding over? Is it likely that I should be really jealous as to one who had given herself heart and soul to me with the generous abandonment you did—and jealous of a *Kergouet*?"

Lettice cannot speak. Will he never let her hear the last of those dreadful kisses? and even if he did, would his silence destroy the fact of their having been given—destroy the impassable barrier that by

them she has erected between herself and all other created men save only this one?

* * * * *

"We must have a rehearsal of 'Ay, Mate!'" says Marie, at luncheon, in a voice of imperious gaiety. "No time before the school? Stuff and nonsense! it does not take twenty minutes. You know I timed you yesterday. Esmeralda is dying to hear it. She is sure, from your 'action' in the pulpit, that you must have had lessons from an actor."

The young clergyman's clear pale skin shows a faint red.

"Isn't that rather a left-handed compliment?"

"It isn't a compliment at all, right or left," replies she, bluntly; "but we *must* just run through it. You are rather inclined to drag when they are bringing the child's body up the shaft."

It is needless to say that Mrs. Trent has her way; and though later, when they have adjusted their differences, Chevening assures his betrothed how very much *à contre-cœur* has been his acquiescence, yet it is with no overt appearance of unwillingness that he follows his hostess and her sister to the music-room, whence poor Miss Kirstie is soon heard being chucked out for having mistakenly tried to set the mining tragedy to a suitable arrangement of howls.

The rest of the party lounge about in the hall for a few moments before separating.

"What is 'Ay, Mate!'" asks Gabriel, approaching, with an inward benison upon his sister, the forsaken fair.

"It is a piece which Mr. Chevening is going to recite at the *Performance*."

She can't resist giving the last two words in ironical italics.

"Is it all as grisly as the specimen Marie gave us?"

Her ringless hand—the fingers of his own female belongings are laden to the knuckles—is propping her cloudy face. She drops it to answer him.

"I do not know."

"You have not heard it?"—with a surprise he cannot hide, and a pleasure he does not try to account for.

"No." After an instant's pause, "I thought I should be less nervous on *the Day* if I did not know what was coming."

The sentence identifies her with Chevening's success or failure; and, of course, in the circumstances nothing can be more proper and natural. Neither of them knows, therefore, why Gabriel asks—

"Shall you be very nervous?"

She answers with a stiff generality. "Do you think that it is ever pleasant to hear any one break down?"

The young man is saved the trouble of rejoining by the approach of his father.

"I am in despair at interrupting you," says the latter, with an apprehensive side look at Lettice; "but our host"—never in the sister's hearing can Mr. Kergouet bring himself to speak of his son-in-law as *Jim*—"our host has suggested a visit to the farm; and, great as the treat would be to me, I am afraid I scarcely dare venture upon the walk without the help of your arm."

CHAPTER XVIII

SEVERAL times during the next day Lettice finds herself wondering whether Gabriel must not wish that he had not an arm at all, either literal or figurative, so incessant and universal are his family's claims upon it. His father's late influenza has apparently hung that unlucky gentleman as a continuous ornament upon it. Whenever Sybil is not grabbing it to force its owner's attention as umpire to some clamorous dispute, Louis is laying a timorously ireful hand upon it in protest against the unspeakable humiliations to which his sisters subject him. Marie's decided hooking of her own into it disposes of all other claimants except her father; and they acquiesce—not quietly, for they never can do anything quietly, but as in the inevitable, such as bills, bruises, torn clothes—in her superior claims.

It is his one holiday—the Easter Monday which releases him from his stool and his ledger, and Miss Trent divines how deep must be his longing to spend every minute of it out-of-doors in the large rapture of enjoyment that the common air, the common sights of the country, breed in the city pent. Yet there is not a sign of disappointment in look or voice when he finds that he is to spend the whole of it inside the Rachel Hall—a name now

sunk, to Lettice's mixed indignation and relief—in that of “the Theatre.”

The day of “the Performance” is alarmingly near, considering the state of forwardness of the preparations—a condition of things unavoidable until the arrival of the actors. Now that they are here the justice of Marie's fiat, that the whole day and every day shall be spent in rehearsing, is not disputed. Though the sun is sending through windows and doors invitations worthy of Italy, such a sharp eye is kept upon stragglers that not one defaulter has to be accounted for when the final scene reaches the end of its first rehearsal—hopeless as first rehearsals always are.

Gabriel has never attempted to straggle. Through the long day he has coached, and prompted, and criticized; quelled Muriel's giggling attempts at gag, and quenched Sybil's horse-play. His behaviour through the petty trials of the day gives a spectator, sitting on a reversed box halfway down the hall, a glimpse, as through a wall-chink, into what his life has been. That spectator is surprised to find herself there.

“You are not coming?” Gabriel has asked her, when the general *tohu-bohu* of the morning's setting off has given him a moment's freedom from his family, glancing at the hopeless indooriness of her hatless head. She shakes it.

“You do not know the history of the Rachel Hall—of what is now called the *Theatre*?”

“No. Is it anything disagreeable?”

In his tone there is a touch of patient expectation of annoyance, and she feels ashamed of having unnecessarily raked up her grievance to prick him

with. Yet she says, "You had better ask Marie," and he leaves her.

Her seat on the reversed box later in the day is Miss Trent's *amende*.

Mrs. Taylor has a box too—a box which she is continually shifting to different distances from the stage, having been seized upon—a most willing capture—by Marie, and deputed the task of judging of the audibility or non-audibility of the performers in different parts of the house. She is able to give a most satisfactory report; and, indeed, the not being easily heard is a weakness that can never have been attributed to the Kergouet ladies.

To save time, it has been decided that there shall be no return to the house for luncheon or tea, but that both shall be eaten and drunk on the stage. The contrary endeavours of the excellent servants to make both repasts as orderly and regular, and of the mistress to make them as scrambling as possible, result in the latter's attaining success enough to enable her to say, looking round on her relatives with a happy moist eye, and pledging them in claret perversely drunk out of a champagne-glass, "This is almost like old times!"

Sentimental reminiscence, however, is not allowed to interfere with the business of the day, and by the time that Lettice rather shamefacedly enters they are all hard at it again. She sits down inoffensively on her box, rather to one side, near a door, so that she is the first object on which Mr. Chevening's eyes light when he enters with the haste of one who has cut some other occupation short to secure his being in time.

"You here?" he exclaims in a key the delight

of which—and, of course, there must be delight—is a little obscured by surprise. “This is unexpected!”

Her answer is a bald “Yes,” and he goes on.

“I thought that you were determined not to hear me till the Day!”

His taking for granted—a natural enough inference—that his own share in the show is the one loadstone that could have overcome her aversion from entering the desecrated memorial to her mother throws upon her beam-ends a person who is guiltily conscious of a memory from which “Ay, Matel” had for the time been completely sponged off. Her reply is thus not quite ingenuous.

“You see, I have altered my mind.”

Still he shows no great elation. “I dare say”—there is a slight wrinkle between his brows—“that you thought—that it struck you as possible that you might make some suggestions—some criticisms; but in a case of this kind one has one’s own conception, and one must stick to it.”

“Certainly.”

“I have had a good deal to bear already in that way from——” A motion of his head indicates Marie, who, having now utilized Mrs. Taylor to represent the leading gentleman, who is not to arrive until the night before the play, is hanging on the vicarress’ neck, noisily sobbing, “You are—you ever will be my own darling Reggy!” “She always thinks herself qualified to teach anybody anything; but I have taken a very firm line with her. I have said, ‘Either I do it in my own way, or I do not do it at all.’”

“And that threat always brings her round?”

Against her inclination, there is something coldly rallying in her tone.

"You know under what pressure I undertook it," he says, drawing himself up, "and how intensely I have always disliked it, and—her."

In rather ludicrous comment on this statement comes Marie's intimate shout from the stage—

"Randal! Randal!"

It causes her brother, who is standing, as he has been for hours, facing the performers with book in hand, reproving, rebuking, exhorting, to look round just in time to catch the expression of disgust with which Mrs. Trent's liberal employment of her *fiancé's* Christian name always paints Lettice's face. The *fiancé* himself misses it, having with praiseworthy self-conquest sprung to obey a hest which on his own showing is hateful to him.

There ensues a little burst of jackdaw chatter, which gives Gabriel his opportunity.

"She did not mean any harm," he says, joining Miss Trent, and speaking unnecessarily low considering the ægis of clamour that protects him. "She always calls everybody by their Christian name, and, you know, he will be her brother-in-law."

If the girl starts, she at least has the probity not to deny the accuracy of the hit.

"Have I given you the right to read my thoughts?" she asks haughtily. Then, with an abrupt change of key, "Of course she has every right to call him Randal. As you say, he will be her brother-in-law."

The last words sound as if they had been said through set teeth.

The departure of Gabriel to his stony-hearted

bank has, owing to the 130 miles which part Trent from London, to take place in the small hours of the morning, and to those who know the Kergouet family it is needless to say that so admirable an opportunity for an all-night sitting is greedily seized upon. Only the authority of the brother, of whom they are so flatteringly eager to see the last, succeeds in driving Louis and Frank to bed soon after midnight.

It is still later before Chevening, with rather lay invectives against his landlady and his latchkeylessness, reluctantly retires. It seems to Lettice that he is anxious to see her off to bed before he does so.

"You have had enough of this, I should think? You will not stay up any longer?"

She detects a strain of suspiciousness in the question, and answers perversely—

"I do not know about that. I do not feel at all sleepy."

"You will be rather *de trop*," he says, evidently inclined to be ruffled. "You are not expected to be included in the 'send off'!"

"No?"

She is conscious of being exasperating with her cavalier monosyllable and her tapping foot; but he has never yet been punished for his two-days'-old outrage, and he may just-as well be so now. Yet he leaves his sting behind him. It is perfectly true. What part has she in the loudly affectionate farewells that in a couple of hours will make the welkin ring?

She rises, and glances round the room. Neither Marie nor her brother are visible. Half an hour ago the former had gone through her favourite

hooking movement, and drawn him away to a private conference. It will be needlessly uncivil not to say good-bye to him.

Lettice sits down again. Could she overhear the dialogue now going on between the two absentees, it might quicken her movements in the direction desired by her betrothed.

"You are not listening to a word I say," Marie is crying; "you are only thinking how soon I shall release you. Well"—with a childishly pettish toss of her head—"there is no accounting for taste."

They have known each other too thoroughly through nineteen tenderly affectionate years for her not to know that this is no random shaft, too thoroughly for him to deny that it has hit. He winces so evidently that her heart smites her.

"You shall have her!" she cries, generously emphasizing her liberality by throwing her arms round his neck. "I do not fancy her myself, as I perhaps may have mentioned once or twice before; but since you do, you shall have her."

"Yes?"—with a melancholy light kiss on the top of her head—"and shall I have the moon and a few of the fixed stars too, to put in my pocket?"

"If they would do you any good, you should," she answers, half laughing and half crying. "But they would not. You would pull them out whenever you wanted to blow your nose."

He does not want to cry, and he can't laugh, so he only silently returns her hug of sympathy.

"After all," says Mrs. Trent, optimistically, when a slight pause has restored her to some, though not very much, composure, "she does not treat you as much like dirt as she does the rest of us."

Oh, if you ever *do* marry her, make her pay, I beseech you, for the way she looks at father!" Then, feeling Gabriel's arms slacken a little at this unchristian parenthesis, and determined to say something that will make them tighten again—"After all, many more unlikely things have happened. There is nothing in the way but that wind-bag, and he is not *really* in the way."

"What do you mean?"

But apparently Marie has gone rather further than she had intended.

"I mean—well, I mean that a wind-bag can never be much of an obstacle, can it?"

She has dropped her arms from round him, and, fidgeting with a thumb and torn copy of the play left lying on a table near her, shows him only her profile. Her brother forcibly turns her countenance fully round again.

"You mean," he says, breathing with a shakiness that brings ruefully home to her how bitterly real and serious the matter is to him, "that Chevening does not care about her—that——"

Since the young man does not finish his sentence himself, he can't well expect his sister to do so, and she does not. There is a silence, through which come squeals of pain, that tell how Sybil, freed from all irksome overseeing, is putting Muriel through a discipline of pinches, to which no amount of custom can reconcile that young creature's surface. The ears of both preoccupied elders remain dull to the appeal.

"I think," says Gabriel, at last, speaking with the utmost difficulty, "that if you are not careful, you will have trouble with that man."

She flings her head up, showing him, with no attempt at concealment of them, a pair of scarlet cheeks.

"Have you ever known me have trouble with *any* man? Have you ever seen the man that I could not keep in hand?" she cries, flashing and sparkling all over, and with a voice unconsciously lifting itself to a dangerously audible pitch.

"Hush! they will hear you." Then, in a moved key, all the brotherly tenderness and confidence in which cannot extract the jealous sting from the sister's heart—"I am not in the least afraid for you—I know what an excellent head you carry upon that little fidgety body. But what about *her*?"

CHAPTER XIX

A WEEK of confusion, noise, and general upsetting of the machine of life follows; not much inferior in anarchy to the days preceding Jim's wedding. The shortness of the time left for preparation, combined with the various magnitude of the programme, would be enough to account for a handsome sum of hurry and bustle in the best-trained professional troupe; when to this is added the Kergouet genius for the topsy-turvy, the chaos beggars description.

The list of attractions is arranged—if that can be said to be arranged which is disarranged every second day—to ensure Esmeralda's appearance in almost every item, and the printer is in despair at the alterations which he is continually and at an impossible nearness to the time of distribution expected to make in the programmes. The telegraph clerk is worked off her legs, and desperate appeals for properties that, though indispensable, have been forgotten, and actors who have made mistakes about trains, succeed each other without a second's intermission along the wires.

Until the last moment it is doubtful whether the leading gentleman's commanding officer will not detain him for some paltry guard or duty, and when hailed like dawn by the sleepless he at length arrives, it is discovered that, though he has brought

a wardrobe of beautiful clothes, and a gentleman to throw limelight upon him, he does not know a word of his part.

"If you can only remember your cues it will be all right," says Esmeralda, with her usual hopefulness, "and we must all help you. That was what happened the other night at the Agora. Since her illness Miss —— has quite lost her memory; so the whole company had to learn her part, and whoever was near at the moment prompted her."

The anecdote would doubtless reassure them all by so illustrious a parallel, did they need it; but as they are already on a toppling height of joyous confidence, it is perhaps superfluous. And their faith in themselves is gloriously justified. The dress rehearsal has been as bad as it was possible to be, a scene of wrangling and tomfooling which there was no Gabriel to suppress, and the voice of the prompter, though "loud in the land," unable to make itself heard above the gabble of argument and contradiction, and yet nobody had seemed the least disturbed or apprehensive.

Esmeralda's optimistic quotation of the axiom that "The worse the dress rehearsal, the better the first night," is not needed to maintain an equanimity of belief in the family troupe that nothing can disturb. And the applause with which, at the close of the Performance, on that first night the curtain is rung down, or rather pulled across, justly earned by the hitchless spirit that has characterized the carrying out of the whole dramatic theme, proves to Lettice—deeply disbelieving until belief has been forced upon her—that they have not over-rated their own gifts.

"Really wonderful for amateurs! But then, Miss Kergouet—what is her stage name, again?" (reading from the list of performers) "Miss Poppy Delafield—is not an amateur. She is a professional, though I do not happen ever to have seen her, do you? and, of course, even *one* professional," etc.

The "one professional" certainly does not spare herself. In the *pièce de résistance* she doubles her part, changing her costume and her appearance with such surprising celerity and success that the slower-witted among the audience do not recognize the identity of the leading lady in picture-hat with the pert boy in tights till near the end of the play. She executes a classic dance; the draperies, as Lettice hears Marie eagerly repeating to half a score admirers, copied from a Greek vase in the British Museum. She sings a topical song.

Sybil sings too, a ditty presumably picked up from a *café-chantant* during her stay in Paris at the pension "kept by a relation of dear mother's."

Most of the audience, not understanding a word of it, applaud vociferously where they think jokes appear to be, and say how good the singer's accent is.

On the other hand, the one or two men who can follow it make such strong representations to Jim upon the subject that it is replaced on the next night—two night performances and one *matinée* are given, to include all classes in the treat by—"When Little Pigs begin to fly."

Perhaps what brings the house down most is when little Frank trots across the stage in his nightgown; but in such a unanimous hurricane of approbation it would be invidious to particu-

larize. If the voice of criticism is heard at all it is to the effect that there is not enough of Mrs. Trent; and, indeed, throughout the performance the comparative indifference of the hostess to her own glory, when compared with her strenuous ardour in the display of her family, cannot escape observation.

"What do they say?" she asks in an excited whisper of her husband whom she has forced on to the first boards he ever trod in his life, to "walk on" in a crowd from which it is not her fault that the vicar himself is absent. "Do not they think Esmeralda quite as good as Winifred Emery?"

"They want more of *you*."

"Pooh!" she cries impatiently. "But they do appreciate her, don't they? She is playing up wonderfully, isn't she? It is such a chance for her to be seen—such an advertisement—particularly as the duchess has come, after all."

Yes, the Duchess of Swyndford has come; arriving smilingly behind time—though that is a weakness for which her present entertainer is scarcely in a position to blame her—and spoiling by the rustle and bustle of her entry, and that of her party, the last scene of the *lever de rideau*.

Had there not been a change in the programme consequent upon Chevening's positive refusal to incur the disadvantage of opening the ball, her Grace would have rushed like a bull in a china-shop into the explanatory opening stanzas of "Ay, Mate!" and not a soul would have known what it was about.

At all events, here she is. And to have secured a duchess-of-all-work, who to the professions of

beauty, philanthropist, and social reformer, adds those of the novelist and patron of the drama, is no light feat.

Lettice, sitting on her right hand in the front row, speculates rather uncomfortably as to whether Randal's first intimation of the presence of the great lady, whose slight he had so bitterly resented, will be the sight of her directly under his nose, and, if so, what disastrous effect the discovery may have upon his recitation? Is it within the bounds of possibility that he may break down?

She has only time for a gleam of rather bogus self-gratulation that, after all, she must still care for him, or she would not mind whether he did or no, when he makes his entry. It is clear—though not to the general public—that he did not know. A slight quiver of the eyelids and pinching in of the handsome lips tells his *fiancée* so. But she need not have feared his breaking down. The opening words reassure her on that head. The having for an auditor the woman who had not thought him worth hearing in the Swyndford pulpit, so far from numbing his powers, seems to kindle them to a fire of inspiration, unreachd, unapproachd before.

Lettice has never much admired "Ay, Mate!" It has seemed to her false, tawdry, pernicious, even, in its tending to kindle class hatreds; to vilify the rich *quâ* rich, and deify the poor *quâ* poor. But to-night, as interpreted by Randal, she cannot deny its effective platform quality.

The reciter advances to the footlights, his tall figure looking loftier than its wont upon the little stage, and above the banked flowers. His beautiful face is pale and serious; his eyes full of sombre

light. He begins in a quiet level voice, his utterance so perfect that each low syllable reaches the furthest corner of the hall, and continues in the same key till the outline of his story stands out clear and sharp. Then comes emotion, action, never excessive, and apparently quite spontaneous, as if arms and hands of their own accord took up the theme of the eloquent tongue; then follows denunciation that, keeping always on this side rant, sends a shiver through the absolutely still audience, and pathos, never maudlin, that brings out stealthily pocket-handkerchiefs.

At the end he is thrice recalled to make his grave bow of acknowledgment.

"But it is admirable!" cries the duchess, wiping her eyes. "I must try to get him to do it for me in London. Will he snub me, do you think, if I ask him? What is his name?"—referring to her programme. "The Reverend Randal Chevening. Oh, of course. How stupid of me to ask!"—with a polite little smile and bow. "He is such a splendid preacher, I am told; but I have never yet been fortunate enough to hear him."

Her civil but perfectly unapologetic words reveal how entirely ignorant or forgetful she is of the slight that had bitten so deep and rankled so long.

"He preached at Swyndford in the winter."

"Did he?"—with an air of flattering incredulity that such a fact could have escaped her memory. "Oh yes, now I recall. It was for my Mothers; and I was unable to be present. I was called away to some tiresome *corvée*. I remember now how exceedingly vexed I was."

It is not much later in the evening—during the

interval for refreshments—that Lettice hears and sees the same soothing balms being poured into her lover's wounds by the very hand that had made them. She is able to trace in Randal the several stages of formally endured introduction, gradually clearing brow and relaxing lips, and final and complete condonation.

And meanwhile the "Performance" rolls along its brilliant and variegated course. The "leading gentleman," though he has sat up all night to master his part, cannot be said to have assimilated it very thoroughly. But as there is not one of the Kergouets—and they are all playing in the piece—who is not more than able and willing to cram him with his words like a young pigeon with peas; and as the splendour of his raiment and the dazzle of his limelight quite take off attention from his oral utterances, he does very well.

And if this is true of the weak point, what can be adequately said of the strong ones? Esmeralda's topical song, the allusions in which, unlike Sybil's cryptic French utterances, every one can understand; Esmeralda's classic dance, "copied from a Greek vase;" Esmeralda's sounding box on the ear, as a sparkling waiting-maid to a too enterprising young Clapperton (with whom, in rehearsal, she has had infinite trouble to make him enterprising enough); Frank's nightgown rescue of his mother (Marie) from a villain;—all pale in popularity before the final appearance in front of the curtain of Mrs. Trent, carrying in her arms a real baby, lent for the occasion, and with which she has been blessed between the second and third acts.

And now it is over. The last plaudits have died

upon the ear, the last carriage-wheel has rolled away with its amused and supper-ward-looking load; and now, through the noble mahogany doors, the company has streamed into the festal dining-room at Trent. It is a more mixed assemblage than the five Knellers and the one Rembrandt have often looked down upon; for Marie has compelled county, town, and village to come in, "that her house may be filled."

The jumble would, in the case of any other hostess, have given dire offence; but "little Mrs. Trent is such a character, she can do anything."

The phrase has sounded over and over again in Lettice's protesting ears. Why should "little Mrs. Trent" have any such immunity from the rules that bind, and have always bound, her betters? The answer, doubtless, is, that to ignore the impossibility of any course of action is halfway to accomplishing it; but Lettice's indignant question being put only in her *for intérieur*, there is naturally no one to make this response.

It is well for Miss Trent's peace that she does not know that among the invited guests had been Mrs. Fairfax; but that lady, despite her one lapse, is wise in her generation, and not even the pleasure of comparing notes with Mr. Kergouet upon the world's slaps can draw her from her safe retreat.

There is one other defaulter, in this case a most unwilling one. The sword of sick-headache, unsuspectingly hung all through the rehearsals over Mrs. Taylor's devoted head, has fallen; and within a mile of the applauses, the wine-cups, and the jests, the drama's truest votary lies prone.

"I knew how it would be," says the vicar, with

the proud sadness of having once again proved his indefeasible right to the custodianship of the achingest head in —shire. "It is always the same. I do not know why poor Mrs. Taylor hoped she might escape this time."

"She has two more chances," replies Lettice, betrayed, contrary to her better judgment and to her long knowledge of her vicar, into expressing a more sanguine view. "We are to have the privilege of seeing the whole show twice over again."

The good man looks hurt, as at one belittling another's great distinction.

"It is one of her worst," he says very gravely; "they never last less than three days."

"Is Jim really going to stand after all, next election?" asks Lettice's other neighbour, Lord Clapperton, casting an inquiring, though not-in-the-least-objecting glance over the mixed assemblage. "Why do I ask? Oh, because I thought it looked as if his missus was doing popularity. She would be invaluable to him," he adds, casting a gay old eye, not empty of envy, upon the place beside the hostess, whence the Duke of Swyndford has ejected him. "She might have let me sit on her other side, instead of beckoning to that little chap out of Brigg's Bank, as I saw her doing."

"She has a brother in a bank," replies Lettice; "so perhaps that accounts for a preference that"—with one of the smiles that, less often than of old, turn her face from a pretty into a charming one—"that is otherwise unaccountable."

We all know that to lead a horse to the water and to make him drink are two different exploits. Marie has led her horses to the water, and they

have done for her what they would not have done for any one else, *i.e.* they have forgiven her for bringing them there; but further they tacitly decline to go.

The party sorts itself, except in the case of the duke and duchess—though, had it been left to Marie, there would have been no except—and falls into its natural sections. The three old maids—Miss Smith, Miss Brown, and Miss Lamothe—who see each other every day, and several times a day, achieve what is always their prime object at a feast, the sitting together; the brewer takes the wine-merchant's wife, and the wine-merchant the brewer's, and the incandescent gas goes in alone. But anyhow, by whatever methods they arrive, here they all are; for ever afterwards in a position to say that they have supped with a duchess, as Pepys said he had "kissed a queen;" and to tell how, at the head of her own table, they had seen Mrs. Trent stand up, and, with her glass in her hand, propose the toast of "The Drama."

It is responded to for Esmeralda by the leading gentleman, who is only too delighted to have an opportunity of identifying himself with the real stage; and having a better command over his own words than he had had over those of his part, brings down the house by the humorous manner in which he does so with pleasantries as brilliant as his limelight.

When a certain pitch of human elation is reached, it is a pity to waste good jokes upon it, since bad ones do as well, if not better; and ere the steady walls of the decorous eighteenth-century house cease rocking with the company's mirth,

Mrs. Trent and her family have degenerated into jokes, which, though perfectly harmless, would, for their sheer badness, find admittance into no jest-book.

Sybil, of course, tends towards horse-play, and tries to hoist both dogs upon the supper-table and incite them to fight; but Miss Kirstie, whose Covenanter blood revolts against play-acting, and who is already upset at having been mountebanked into a Dog Toby collar in cut paper, shows such a clean white row of reasons against her exhibition as not only arrests the project, but also puts an end to the sitting, which otherwise might have lasted till sunrise.

* * * * *

And now it is all over. The second and third performances have followed the first into the past—second and third performances alike unseen by Mrs. Taylor, who, true to her husband's prevision, rises from her sick-bed only in time to see the dismantling workmen and property-laden carts unbuild the fabric of such high hopes.

Marie is almost as much cut up at the vicareess's disaster as that lady herself, and spends herself in efforts to repair the ill nature of Fate by vivid descriptions, posthumous dressings-up, and reiterated photographic groups, which turn the Vicarage drawing-room into a temple of Thalia.

Mrs. Trent's hands have indeed been full during the eventful week, as to her other manifold labours she has added that of personally assuring herself that all the insignificant people have good places, that the deaf are seated where they can hear, and the purblind where they can see. She gallops

through it all somehow with indomitable spirit, carrying her troupe with her to the brilliantly successful close.

"When the Little Pigs begin to fly" has superseded Sybil's *café-chantant* song with universal approbation, and being placed at a safe distance from "Ay, Mate!" has not materially injured that tragic utterance, which indeed brings out quite as many pocket-handkerchiefs as at first. When their own duchess had led the way, who would not blush not to follow?

"Her Grace is really very much affected," Miss Lamothe has said in a respectful whisper to one of her cronies. "Now that she has turned her face this way I can distinctly see a tear on her cheek. Yes, she is wiping it away."

"Wiping it away!" repeats Miss Brown, whose sight, although her hearing is better, is not so good as her ally's. "Then she can't be as much made up as they say."

"Are you converted?" Randal has asked his *fiancée*, with a smile that he tries not to make too triumphant, getting near her for the first time at the very end of the revel.

The duchess has talked to Chevening all through supper, turning her shoulder upon Jim. The ladies whom Mr. Trent escorts to his own board invariably say how much they like him, but none of them ever try to talk to him. There is a theory widely held through the neighbourhood that he prefers silence. It has not originated with nor is ever supported by himself, but the belief is too deep-rooted now to be dislodged, and he acquiesces in it with his usual good-humoured patience.

"Am I converted to what?" Then, ashamed of a pretended ignorance that is merely petulant, she answers, "I thought you did it well."

The encomium is evidently as much inferior in warmth to what he has just been receiving, as *was* Cordelia's profession of affection to her sisters, and his face falls. Her conscience smites her a little for gratuitously snubbing him in his moment of perhaps just elation, mainly because she herself is feeling cross and jaded.

"There can be no doubt as to its having been a success."

"So she has been telling me"—with a slight jerk of his head. "Of course, one cannot judge of one's own performance, and equally of course strangers say civil things to one; but from *you*, at least, I knew that I should get the truth."

Once again conscience pricks. Is he so sure of getting the truth from her? Is she not rather a walking lie in her relation to him?

"I think you did it admirably."

His face lights up. "If my dear Lady Veracity tells me so, I may begin to believe it," he cries, with a gaiety that seems to her out of drawing.

"You have been invited to repeat it in London."

"How did you know that?"—rather quickly.

"The duchess consulted me as to whether you would be likely to snub her if she asked you."

There is a touch of banter in her voice. He looks slightly confused.

"I believe she did say something about it"—indifferently—"but, of course, it is entirely out of the question."

"I suppose so."

This is not the rejoinder he had meant to receive, and she knows it.

"So you have forgotten her Grace's trespasses?" cries Marie, flying up to them in mad gaiety, the last guest, except Randal, having at length departed. "And you did it very thoroughly, too—no half measures. I saw you at supper."

"I am flattered that you had so much attention to spare for me," he answers resentfully, and flashing at her one of those dark looks which have always puzzled Lettice.

"Ah, but, you see, his Grace was not begging me to come and perform for him in London, as her Grace was you," retorts she, teasingly.

"You are very liberal of your 'Graces,'" says Lettice, tartly and jarred.

"I try to be," replies Mrs. Trent, maliciously. "I called the duke 'your Grace' every time I spoke to him. Was not that right?"

CHAPTER XX

THE Kergouet visit lasts for a full fortnight after their theatrical display. Why should they hurry away when they are giving and receiving so much pleasure? By the end of it Miss Trent doubts her own identity. It is not as if she were able to be merely an onlooker at their revels. *Nolens volens*, they drag her into them. Nothing can make the younger members of the family understand that she dislikes and disapproves of them in the highest degree, nor that there is any particular sacredness about her sitting-room which on their wet-day indoor rompings about the passages they freely use as a bolt-hole. And although Esmeralda apologizes for and deprecates these intrusions, her own droppings in, preceded by a rap at the door which does not wait for a permission to enter, dropping in to tell Miss Trent she must be lonely and regale her with *orts* and fragments from the theatrical feast that is always being held in her own mind, are in her victim's opinion a not inferior ill. The visits have taken their rise in Esmeralda's requests to Lettice to hear her words.

"I am always a slow study," says the little actress, cheerfully; "but then, when once I have got the words into my head they are there for ever. There is not a single *rôle* I have ever learnt that I

could not say through now from beginning to end. Would you care to try me?"

"Oh, by no means," returns Lettice, precipitately. "Of course, I take your word for it."

It is certainly not Miss Trent's fault that, when she is feeling most uncharitably towards Muriel and Sybil for some freshly perpetrated enormity, they should gallop up to her and, flinging their arms about her neck, swear they had never known what happiness was before.

"You are very fond of 'swearing,'" she answers, disengaging herself, ruffled, the first time this occurs.

"Are we?" replies Muriel. Then, regretfully, "We do not know many English oaths," but, with recovered self-respect, "we know all the worst French *jurons*."

It is not Lettice's fault that Louis, who is inclined to be a tell-tale—the vice of the oppressed—makes her the *confidante* of his sister's iniquities, nor that they in return utilize her as a means of airing their estimate of him.

"We like Frank," they say on one of these occasions; "but we get tired of people. We used to like Louis, but"—eyeing him with dispassionate disapproval—"we do not like him at all now."

Louis's delicate, girlish face grows pink. "You cannot possibly dislike me," he says, with his strong French accent, "so much as I dislike you."

The range of the Miss Kergouets' crimes is immense, embracing the most childish ones as well as those of an almost grown-up cast. Released from the confines of a narrow Paris *appartement*, their joy in their emancipation seems as if it could

not translate itself adequately, except by transgression of some law. They invade every province, crying "Havoc" to the "Dogs of War" wherever they go. They parade their wickednesses, as when they buy shag illegally at the village shop, and smoke it brazenly in the village street. In a root-shed they find some dahlia tubers, cherished of the gardener's soul, and hew them into bits. Asked why they have committed this piece of wanton destruction, answer puerilely that they have been playing at mashing potatoes. No babyish mischief is too small, nor any half-grown-up indiscretion too great for them.

Everywhere Sybil leads—dauntless, conscienceless, unconquerable, hard as nails. She ends by extracting an unwilling admiration from Miss Trent, an admiration that dates from the day when, within twenty-four hours, she flays her shin, has her thumb pinched by a companion in the hinge of a door, and runs a splinter of wood into the palm of her hand so deep that it has to be extracted by pincers—all without caring a straw.

At the end of the fortnight, despite the heavy bill for repairs which marks their track wherever they go, Lettice is surprisedly conscious that she dislikes the Kergouet family distinctly less than she did at the beginning. They enjoy themselves so extravagantly, and are so absurdly persistent in telling her so, and in trying to enlist her help in securing a speedy repetition of their bliss, and to the end remain so loyally unconscious of antipathy or even unfriendliness on her part, that by dint of ignoring them, these sentiments imperceptibly lose much of their earlier vigour.

The Miss Kergouets are dreadful girls, being and doing everything that is most offensive to her; and yet there is something about their tremendous vitality, their boisterous good-humour, their invincible taking for granted that she sympathizes in their terrible sports, that ends by partially disarming her.

"This is a white stone day for you, I suppose?" says Marie, as she enters the dining-room on her return from the highly emotional "send off" she has been giving her relatives from the little local station. The tears are rolling down her cheeks; but through them defiance flashes — defiance crossed by a sort of hankering after being contradicted.

"Is it?" replies Lettice, coldly resenting this gratuitous attempt to pick a quarrel. Then, rather relenting at the sight of the small woeful loveliness that even abundant crying cannot much deface, she adds, "One gets used to anything." It is not a very gracious concession, but she softens it by adding with a smile, "I mean in the way of noise."

Mrs. Trent does not rejoin at once, standing disconsolately looking out of window, whence not even a trace of Sybil's or Muriel's breakages is visible to cheer her. Presently she returns to the table, and, as if repeating unwillingly a lesson learnt by rote, says—

"My father bid me thank you."

"Thank me! For *what*?"

The daughter shrugs her slight shoulders expressively.

"Father is always very courteous. You heard

Esmeralda her words, and you were fairly civil to Gabriel. I suppose it was more than he expected."

Then her tears master her; and though she has generally the indifference of a child or a savage as to being seen publicly weeping, she now flies, carrying her grief with her, out of the room.

Miss Trent remains for a few moments staring straight before her. So this is the whole sum of human kindness in respect to the Kergouet family that can be scraped up to her credit! She does not know whether she ought to be remorseful or not. She does not even know whether she is remorseful or not. She only knows that her spirit sits heavily upon its throne within her. To lighten it, to distract her thoughts, or perhaps solely because she thinks it a duty, she goes, heavily still, to see a sick woman in the village, only to find that the invalid, though politely trying to disguise the feeling, is disappointed that she is not Marie. She returns home more heavily, to be told that Mr. Chevening has been waiting for her for half an hour in her sitting-room.

Heavily still, most heavily, she joins him. He has paid her several visits there during the past fortnight, but the young Kergouets have so entirely destroyed the privacy of the room by their incursions—a result for which for once she heartily blesses them—that Randal and she have scarcely met as lovers.

The turning of love's bower into a railway waiting-room naturally provokes much protesting ire from the young man; but a proposal that they shall defend themselves by locking the door against intruders meets with such lively dissent on the part

of his lady-love that he does not repeat it. There are no protecting Kergouets to-day, and she reads the consequences to be expected in his eye.

"I have come to congratulate you."

"Upon what?"

The initial embrace has been got through.

"Upon the exodus! They are really gone?"

"Yes."

"Thank Heaven!"

She is still in her walking things, and, in order to free herself from him, begins to take off her feather boa.

"I think I am too wicked to-day to be able to say or feel 'thank Heaven!' for anything."

Her tone expresses such utter out-of-tuneness that he looks at her, startled.

"What does this mean?"

"I do not know," she answers flatly.

"Is it the natural consequence of a swarm of locusts having passed over you?" he asks, laughing satirically. "But they are gone."

"It has nothing to say to the swarm of locusts."

"Are you ill?"—recovering on this excellent excuse the momentarily lost proximity. "But no, your eyes are as clear as crystal, your skin——"

"Oh, my eyes and skin are all right," she answers impatiently.

"There is something that is not all right about you," he answers, reddening with displeasure, "and I think I have a right to know what it is."

Her answer sounds irrelevant. "I have been to see Mary Beech. I think she is certainly dying; and she told me that you had not been near her for ten days."

He loses his temper. "You mean to charge me with neglect of duty? You have taken upon you the *rôle* of censor?" he cries; then, after a minute or two of angry silence, he resumes his self-command. "Possibly you are right; possibly, probably I have shared the general deterioration of tone that has invaded the parish ever since——"

"If you are alluding to Marie," she breaks in, "she is far more active in visiting the sick than you ever were."

His jaw drops, petrification at this adoption of the part of heated defender of what she has always reprobated on the part of his fair one blunting at first the force of the severe snub to himself. He cannot be much more astonished at her partisanship than she is herself.

No voice is heard for a space but that of Miss Kirstie, who from her watch-tower on the window-seat has spied a boy crossing the park. His uniform tells her that he is of that class whose heels taste better than those of any other; and the little diversion of conniving at her efforts to reach him by opening the door for her to bundle out in pursuit restores speech to the lovers, or at least to one of them.

"We have both deteriorated within the last three months," Lettice says, in a voice of melancholy candour. "I am quite conscious of it myself; I was saying so only the other day to some one."

He is far too much ruffled to give the amorous contradiction to such a statement which he would certainly have done half an hour before; and she continues, with a partly conscious, partly uncon-

scious enjoyment of bracketing him with herself in her depreciation.

"We are not so spiritually minded as we were."

"We have certainly a good deal changed our relative positions," he retorts, with a laudable effort to disguise the poignant pique her candour engenders. "It is probably difficult to you to believe now that you once looked up to me."

If her thought were to translate itself into words, it would run somewhat thus, "Looked up to you? That must have been a long time ago." But to say so would be to burn her ships down to the water's edge. She contradicts him as little as he had contradicted her.

Her eyes wander to the window through which Miss Kirstie—some kind friend having removed all obstacles in the way of intervening portals to her chase—is seen scampering as fast as her short legs and fat body will permit in pursuit of the telegraph boy, who, knowing her all too well to tarry, is showing her those appetizing heels of his only at hopeless distance ahead.

"We ought not to have let her out," says Miss Trent, with a lenient smile, and feeling a momentary relief in the relaxed tension.

But to the other interlocutor the situation is far too grave to permit of any interlude for Miss Kirstie's alarms and excursions.

"What is the drift of these home truths, if truths they are, might I ask?" he inquires, with a pale and rigorous politeness.

"What indeed?" she murmurs.

"Are you leading up to telling me that you wish to throw me over?"

The phrase strikes her as crude, even to shockingness; and the tone in which she repeats it may justify the instantly restored confidence of his look and voice.

"No," he says, regarding her with a victor's eye, which she finds hard to bear. "That is, of course, nonsense. Such an expression could have no meaning between you and me. After that first sacred, sealing kiss——"

"Am I never to hear the last of it?" she breaks in, with a desperation that would sound extremely comic to any dispassionate bystander; but is absolutely without that element to its hapless utterer. "Because I was once unladylike enough to take the initiative—— No"—correcting herself, rearing her fine throat, and looking squarely at him with recaptured self-respect—"no, it was not unladylike, because I believed it to be the real thing, and I wanted to show you that when I gave, I gave freely."

"And now you have come to the conclusion that it was not the real thing?" he asks, his confidence obviously oozing away into angry, pale misgiving. "You wish to take back your gift? That, thank God, you can never do. No sponge can ever wipe off the memory of that voluntary—yes, most voluntary—gift of yours from your memory any more than from mine; but you have got as far as the wish? I defy you to get further; and now you would fain give freely to some one else."

"It is a perfectly unjustifiable assumption," she replies, almost inaudibly, from excess of anger. "If

you cannot discuss the question without insulting me——”

“I did not mean to insult you,” he cries, dropping down in sudden revulsion upon his knees and lifting the hem of her gown to his lips.

The action strikes her as theatrical, and out of taste; but there is no play-acting about the alarm and misery of his eyes.

“What I meant to say was,” she begins again presently, in broken phrases, and with great difficulty, “that even—granting I meant all you say—by that—kiss—which I—do not attempt to deny; yet—that supposing afterwards—later—we found we had—made a mistake—what was intended for a seal of eternal love—ought not to be turned into a chain to tie two galley-slaves together.”

“*A chain to tie two galley-slaves together!* It has come to that!”

The tragedy in his tone is better than anything in “Ay, Mate!” and would be warmly relished by the duchess could she hear it, having moreover the superiority over his histrionic success of being absolutely genuine. It does not make Lettice feel the actual criminal that it would have done a couple of months ago; but it revives in some degree the sense of guilt towards him.

She looks at him with troubled eyes, trying by their aid to reconstruct the person to whom she had given that now incomprehensible embrace. The explanation that dawns upon her as she looks, that it was not this lover’s at all—that it was Love’s own lips she had thought to kiss—can scarcely be made clear to the counterfeit Eros. It is a difficulty in which many women involve themselves,

but from which few extricate themselves quite handsomely.

"I never said that it had come to that," she answers. "I was only supposing a possibility."

"Three months ago would such a possibility have seemed possible?"

She hesitates, probing memory to find how far the roots of her disloyalty to him run back.

"We are neither of us what we were two months ago," she answers evasively—"certainly not what we thought we were going to be! Have we raised and strengthened and ennobled one another, as we planned? For myself, I can truly say that I never recollect a time when I have done so little practical good, and given way to so many unworthy tempers and unchristian thoughts."

The quality of Christianity is, perhaps, not very conspicuous in the elation felt by Miss Trent at the liberal measure of speaking out she thus at last allows herself.

"And you lay the blame upon *me*?" he asks with a white protest of indignation that she cannot but feel to be partly merited.

"No, that would not be fair; of course, a great deal of it has been due to Marie; but even there"—with a much greater ease of utterance than had marked the beginning of her sentence, and a renewal of the sense of elation—"if you had taken a different tone, had been less prejudiced and bitter, had soothed my feelings of exasperation instead of stimulating them——"

She stops suddenly. A piece of your mind is a delightful present to make to a friend—upon occa-

sion; but the size must be proportioned to his capacities, and you may overdo it.

The recipient of Miss Trent's bounty has sunk down with bowed head before her beautifully neat bureau, and from behind the long, high-bred hands that hide his face comes a sound that might be mistaken for a sob. Her eyes take the shocked roundness of a child that has toppled down a china jar, and after a moment's hesitation she goes up and touches him.

The light contact brings him with a start to his feet, and he faces her with dignity, and with a countenance that, to her relief, is not disfigured by the moisture of tears.

"You have made your meaning very clear," he says. "Your methods are always direct. I have to thank you for giving me three months of your life; which, though irksome to you, to me have been——"

He pauses with a determination, of which she feels and respects the manliness, rather not to finish his sentence at all, than to end it with a mendicant's whine. His words set the door to freedom, which she has been longing to break down even with axe and crowbar, wide open without a push; yet she makes no step towards passing through it.

"You are going very fast," she says with a sort of gasp.

"Faster than you wish?"

There is no revived confidence in his tone to jar her, and its anger—there *must* be anger—is shrouded in a mournfulness so opaque as to be scarcely detectable through it.

"Yes, much faster."

She pauses; the longing for emancipation, now that she has allowed herself once to look it in the face, pouring over her in almost overwhelming strength. But she has ever been a just woman, and what sort of justice is this that she is meting out to him? He has always been what he is now, only that she had not the wit to see it. Is she to punish him for her own blunderheaded blindness?

"Because I suggest that our engagement has not brought us quite all we hoped, you jump at once to the conclusion that I want to break it off?"

"And you do not?"

The quickened breath and spurting words tell of revived hope, and bring an answering repulsion to the girl.

"I do not know what I wish," she says, walking away from him towards the window. "I want to do right."

What there is in her words to bring it there she cannot conceive, but his arm is suddenly round her waist.

"If it is a question of conscience, let me decide it for you," he whispers passionately. "You used to bring your difficulties to me to solve."

The allusion is an unwise one. It brings before her with such startling prominence the change wrought in herself since the state of things to which he refers, and the truth of which she cannot deny.

"A long engagement is always a trying thing," she says, moving restlessly in the encircling ring of clerical broadcloth, but not having the strength of purpose absolutely to elude it; "and you know it is your own fault that it *has* been a long one. I offered to marry you months ago."

"Are you going to punish me for having had some self-respect?" he asks in a passion of upbraiding, tightening his pressure, the pressure that had once set her own blood answeringly tingling—a recollection that enhances her present rage of revolt.

"It is no question of punishment," she answers, turning her head right over her own shoulder in flight from his lips; "but of late we seem to have influenced each other for ill instead of good. Marie is a case in point."

An excess of proximity makes it difficult to deliver a homily effectively, and it is with a surprise not inferior to her relief that at this stage Lettice finds herself suddenly set free.

"We have been too much in sympathy about her," she continues with much greater fluency; "we have egged each other on in our want of charity towards her. I was wrong to lay all the blame on you just now. I do not think there has been a pin to choose between us."

He receives the rebuke thus neatly halved in motionless silence, and she cannot even see his face.

"For that and for other reasons," she goes on, "I have been thinking that it would be a good thing—good for us both, I mean—if—if—we separated for a short time."

She pauses, tentatively eyeing him to see how he takes this cold douche; but the one quarter of his face within eye-range does not enlighten her much. She thinks he gives a slight start.

"It need not be for long," she goes on, nervously feeling her way—"it need not be for long."

I should naturally be going up to London now. Nobody would think it odd; it would create no remark."

She calls a halt, but in vain. "There is neither voice, nor any that answered."

"And when I come back——"

He wheels round upon her, and at once the full battery of his eyes—wronged, suspicious, woeful, and fulminating—is playing upon her.

"And when you come back?"

The voice is the prophet's voice which has often made the flesh of the female members of the Trent congregation delightfully and awfully creep.

"When I come back," replies Miss Trent, unworthily and baldly, "perhaps things will be more satisfactory."

It is not in the least what she had meant to say. The thunder is gone out of his tones, and only infinite reproach left, when next he speaks.

"And you are going to leave me here to fight alone against all the malign influences that——"

She bursts into uneasy laughter. "Malign influences—here, in this dear little Sleepy Hollow?"

A heavier cloud than before passes over his face.

"In Holy Scripture," he says, "the devils were inside the man, not outside."

"If that is the case, he would carry them with him wherever he went," replies she, sententiously, but with unanswerable logic.

CHAPTER XXI

ON the evening of the same day—that of the departure of the Trent family—an almost incredible quietude wraps the house. Even the high voice of its mistress, generally so piercing and ubiquitous, is stilled. Not having her fellows to call to, what pleasure is there in shrieking? The sight of the microscopic dinner-table fills her eyes with water; and Jim's brilliant remark of what a difference there is between now and this time yesterday is received in a convulsed silence. She has heroically kept her seat all through dinner, a concession to Jim which she has for several weeks been trying to make, but whose difficulty on the present occasion Lettice perhaps appreciates even more than does the object of it.

When the end of the much-abbreviated repast sets her free, she wanders forlornly about, tenderly touching the back of the chair upon which Mr. Kergouet's limp head had rested, surreptitiously kissing the paper-knife with which he had cut his evening paper, going through a hundred little foolish, loving antics.

For the first time in either of their lives a feeling of genuine human pity towards her objectionable, and though they get above their boots now heart.

"We are certainly very dull," she says, when the course of her melancholy flittings brings Marie near.

The words are brusquely shot out, and have to be severely pushed from behind in order to get them out at all; and their veracity is not unimpeachable, but their effect is immediate.

"Yes, aren't we?" cries the other, eagerly, dropping down, with her astonishing suppleness, on the carpet. "But"—with a rush of suspicion and a darkening brow—"I suppose you meant it ironically."

"No, I did not. I do feel very dull to-night."

This, at least, is gospel truth.

"I am afraid you must have been nearly deafened now and then," rejoins the other, quite reassured, and her own voice beginning to lift itself again from the dust of its dejected extinction; "but though their voices are loud, they are not disagreeable, and though they get above their boots now and then——"

But Miss Trent has reached the end of her Christian tether; to acquiesce in encomiums of the Miss Kergouets is still beyond her.

"Kept well in hand, and with proper discipline," she begins, in a somewhat preachy key; but she is not suffered to proceed far.

"Proper discipline! Proper fiddlesticks!" cries Marie, leaping up and making off, greatly offended. So the olive branch is, in a measure, retracted.

It is offered, accepted, and dignifiedly resumed or pepperily tossed back several times during the ten days that elapse before Lettice's departure; but, at least, there has been a question of it between

the two belligerents. Marie certainly after her family's departure has less patently than before the end in view of making Lettice squirm, by the vulgarity of her remarks, before the servants; nor does she, unless under great provocation, allude to "the aristocracy." On the other hand, Lettice's sneers at the stage are reduced to an average of six a day.

It is, perhaps, difficult to do full justice to a whole-hearted dislike of two people at once; and probably Miss Trent's reduced animus against her foe is partly due to the daily growing repulsion she feels from her "friend." Yet when she goes, drawing long breaths of relief as each hoof-beat of the horses that draw her to the station increases the distance between her and his lips and arms, she is still chained to him. How can she, in bare justice, rive that now eating fetter? What answer that could satisfy her own conscience or honour has she been able to make to the importunity of his questions?

"What have I done? How am I different from the man you kissed? Yes, kissed your whole soul into! Never has any woman kissed me as you did. I mean"—correcting himself—"my imagination is not strong enough to picture a kiss that implied a more absolute surrender of soul and body."

She shudders, though he does not see it; head bent, and long arms hanging at her side in utter self-abasement. Yes, it is true; horribly, degradingly, irrevocably true! Then he changes his venue.

"Who needs you as I do? Who needs you at all, except me? What are you to Jim now? Has not that Merry Andrew, that rope-dancer——"

She puts out her hand with a gesture of disgust, in peremptory arrest.

"Stop!" she says. "We have had more than enough of this."

He accepts her rebuke more meekly than she had expected, and then, with a look of shame—

"You are right," he says. "I lose my balance, I lose my head when I think of the way in which she has superseded you everywhere but here!"—striking himself on the heart; "but I will say no more about her; only answer me truly, Who is there, in all the wide world, that needs you—really needs you, except me? And do *I* not need you? Oh, if you could look in *here!*"—again smiting himself on the heart—"and see *how* much—how, beyond the poor power of words to express, how much!"

Gestures and manner may belong too much to the decorated order; but through them the penetrating voice of Truth knells in her ears. He does need her. There can be no doubt of that. And, as he has truly said, everywhere, except with him, she is superseded.

"Come back to me soon—*soon*," he murmurs, passionately kissing the revolted pink ear, into which he whispers his parting prayer, "my rudder, my conscience, my salvation!"

* * * * *

The words of whose adequacy to convey his own heart-throes he has complained are quite as incompetent to express *how* glad his rudder, his conscience, and his salvation are to drive away from him.

It is April, verging on May, when they depart,

but September has come ripely in before they return to take up their triple office. Not till Miss Trent gets well away to the secure haven of her aunt's house in London does she fully realize the enormity of the relief she feels at her escape. For weeks, at least, she will not hear the odious formula, "Mr. Chevening is in the boudoir, 'm; he has been there a quarter of an hour." For weeks she may bend her head in security over her books, without her reluctant nape being surprised by drops of fire from a burning mouth that has come up unawares behind it. For weeks her waist will have no girdle but its cool ribbon one, and her lips will be as much at liberty as the smutty London air, which they delightedly inhale at the thought.

The sensible aunt receives her with her usual level goodwill, asks her how she gets on with Marie, and whether there is going to be a baby.

The speaker answers the first of the two questions herself.

"Not that it matters much to you now whether you do or not, as I suppose you will be marrying almost directly yourself. Not till he gets a living? And is he likely to get a living? I hear he is a wonderful preacher. Yes, Madeline, I went to the Ladies' Shirt Company about the muslin blouses. They say you *must have* two dozen."

This last utterance is addressed to one of her daughters, who, though the only good-looking one, has perversely elected to espouse a young gentleman who grows wines, that few people have as yet been found thirsty enough to drink, in a South American Republic, and is now being accoutred to accompany him thither.

The mother has snubbed the aspirant as long as there was any hope in snubbing, and has then without transition or apology sensibly taken him to her breast. To the rest of the household the lovers are as unmixed an ill as permitted lovers are and must always be and have been.

To Lettice they are a theme of incessant and almost awful wonder. That any girl should wish to be alone with her *fiancé* has in the light of her own experience become a monstrous improbability, but that she should commit excesses of selfishness, want of consideration, impatience, and ill manners to attain that end strains her powers of belief almost to bursting-point.

The discovery that a like course of conduct is expected of herself as soon as Randal shall appear upon the scene fills her with such confused stupefaction that she has hardly breath left to protest. Of what use to protest, since, thank Heaven, in the face of her rigid stipulation to the contrary, it is impossible that her betrothed should appear on the scene to make apparent to her relatives what a universe separates her condition from that of the love-sick Madeline. But in this she is mistaken.

"I have heard from Randal that he is coming up to-day," she says one morning, appearing at breakfast with a very cloudy brow.

"Well, my dear," replies her aunt, with cheerful resignation, "the blow is not an unexpected one. The girls must have a holiday. *Fräulein* must visit her friends, and you must have the schoolroom."

"Indeed we will have nothing of the kind," replies the niece, with indignant precipitation. "We have not the least wish to be alone. I mean, we

see so much of each other at home, and it is not to see me that he is coming. The Duchess of Swyndford has wired for him to recite at her concert to-morrow. I suppose one of her performers has fallen through."

"The Duchess of Swyndford's concert! I am glad you reminded me of it. She made me take tickets. What a tax these charitable entertainments have become! So he is to recite at it?"

"Yes."

"Will he be comic or tragic?"

"Oh, tragic—profoundly tragic."

Miss Trent wonders whether her relative detects the note of irony so plainly perceptible to her own ears that has crept into her voice. That relative's next comfortable utterance—"I am glad of that; comic recitations never make me laugh, but tragic ones sometimes do"—proves that she has not.

Having added that of course he must come to dinner, her mind returns to its mazy path among mosquito curtains and gauze underclothing by the banks of the River Plate.

Mr. Chevening's *fiancée* cannot be said to receive him with effusion.

"This is against the bond," she says austere, holding out her hand at the longest stretch of a perfectly straight arm to ensure a safe distance.

He answers her only by a look of deprecating reproach, and his whole air is so agitated that her smitten conscience, or what she takes for such, forces a milder tone into her voice.

"I am afraid you are feeling very nervous."

He makes a mute sign with the head, whether of assent or protest she does not quite understand.

"It was very short notice."

The implication is obvious.

"You mean that I am a stop-gap," he says, restored to speech by the hint and palely reddening.

"I do not think that as a rule I am wanting in proper pride, but I did not see that this was a case for its exercise. The excellence of the object——"

"Yes, yes, of course."

The recovered apostledom of his manner restores the steel casing to her heart. Her face must be steely too, judging by the almost tremulous doubtfulness of his next words.

"I know that you do not care about 'Ay, Mate!' but you will come and hear me?"

"Won't it make you worse—more nervous—if you know that I am there?"

The question is regretted as soon as uttered, such a shower of rhetoric does it bring about her ears in the shape of a fiery torrent of asseveration that she is his rock, his bulwark, that it is only the consciousness of having the ægis of her strong presence that can uphold him through the ordeal ahead of him.

One of the waves of contempt for which she has long ceased to feel remorse washes over her, but she complies, her heart leaden at the thought of how dreadfully he needs her.

It is true that the admiration felt by Lettice for the piece chosen by or rather for her lover—since it was Marie's selection—has always been of the smallest; yet on the present occasion she is conscious that that small has become very sensibly smaller. It seems to her that the nervous excitement of the reciter has made him exaggerate and

coarsen every point of what had been at Trent a rendering admirable for restraint and reserve power.

As she looks at him from under her eye-lashes, while as the virtuous miner he hurls his denunciation of the upper classes at the delighted row of peeresses before him, his betrothed makes a queer inward measurement of the distance covered by her since Easter in her travelling away from Love. Then she had congratulated herself on feeling nervousness lest he should break down. Here and now would not she in her heart of hearts be rather glad that some signal humiliation should overtake him?

If, indeed, she cherishes such a wish, it is not destined to be gratified. A hyper-fashionable London audience, though the coldest created or conceivable, is not as a rule very critical; and though much too lazy to express admiration, is quite capable of feeling it enthusiastically for the second-rate and the tawdry.

Despite the inward disparagement of it by his *fiancée*, Chevening's performance cannot be justly classed under either of these heads; but his success—and that at least is unquestionable—is chiefly due to the piquancy of the contrast between the melancholy distinction of his appearance—his high nose, and admirably cut mouth—and the furious Socialism of his utterance. He is new, he is handsome, and he has told the fair ones bang out to their very faces, in a strong, if not very accurate Yorkshire accent, that they are no better than they should be! What more can be needed to complete their subjugation? Naturally, nothing. Yet the

tribute he so amply reaps, it seems, have another added to them.

"How did you think it went off?" he asks, when he comes to bid Lettice good-bye next morning, the cousins, to her annoyance, fleeing before him in such Passover haste as not even to have time to take their kneeling-troughs with them.

She had contemned his over-night's despondency as cowardly, but she dislikes his morning's jubilation even more.

"Admirably!"

"I owe it all to you!" he cries, with exultant emotion. "If you had not been there I do not know what might not have happened; but when I caught sight of your anxious face"—her eyebrows rise imperceptibly—"in all that crowd I found it in one second—I said to myself, 'She shall not be ashamed of me!' and—you were not?"

There is such a hunger for her approbation in the eyes that the great ladies had found so expressive and charming that she is ashamed of her niggard ability to give. Yet it remains inability.

"You were not ashamed of me?" he repeats.

"Not at all."

"Did you like the new way I gave, 'Thou'rt a good wench'? I know you did not care about my first reading of it. Does it grow upon you at all?"

His persistence teases her. "What does it matter if it does not," she cries crossly, "when I am in a minority of *one*?"

"It is because I am new, I suppose," he says, with a faint smile of reminiscence, and a modesty which her partiality labels as "mock." "Several

people have asked me to repeat it at their houses in behalf of different charities."

Her eye rolls wildly. This means that he will be running up again repeatedly in reply to the calls of modish philanthropy.

"Do not," she says brusquely.

His bright countenance clouds. "You disapprove? You are adverse?"

"I do not want you to dwindle from the apostle I once thought you into a paltry drawing-room reciter."

This is the nearest approach to a compliment he can extract from her, and as she always manages to get behind a chair when he approaches her, and relentlessly reminds him of "the bond," he cannot be said to have been much the gainer by his breach of contract.

CHAPTER XXII

FOR Miss Trent the summer passes with unexampled rapidity. Usually she has been among the earlier departures from London; among those to whom town pleasures dwell only in the outskirts of the heart, and country ones at its very centre. This year she lingers till the end of all things, till the wood pavement smells intolerably, and nothing but caretakers and M.P.'s are left.

Miss Trent's aunt is one of the few wives who do not desert their toiling legislators, so she has the excuse of staying on with her. Yachting is perfectly indifferent to her, yet she goes to Cowes. Her garden has always hitherto seemed preferable to the moors, yet she pays visits in Scotland. Anything, anything to stave off the unavoidable return, the unescapable decision.

Randal has not again transgressed against the bond, though once or twice she hears of him obliquely as in London, and "Ay, Mateing"—always with a buzz of applause about his name—at various great houses. Since correspondence has been forbidden by her equally with personal intercourse, she cannot blame him for not imparting his triumphs to her. She will doubtless hear plenty about them soon now.

This is one of the oppressive thoughts—quite a

minor one—that pass through the head which she reluctantly lifts from her pillow at the hotel at Perth on the morning appointed for her return to Trent.

It would be bad enough to be going back to the same state of things as she had left there; but how incomparably have her prospects worsened since her departure! One on the top of another, and all within the last week, swift and cruel as Job's messengers, the baleful tidings have battered her consternated ears. Firstly, in a newspaper casually picked up, her eye, glancing over the "Deaths," takes in the announcement that old Mr. Grant of Appleton has had his third stroke, and succumbed to it. Secondly, the post brings her a note, almost illegible through excitement, from Randal himself, to tell her that he has just been informed by the lawyer of an unknown old lady, lately deceased, that in gratitude for the benefit her soul has derived from his Advent Sermons she has left him £30,000 at present invested in $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. Consols. Lastly and worstly—if in such ills there can be a worst—a wire—no other means can convey such news fast enough—informs her that Chevening has been offered the incumbency of a fashionable Mayfair chapel.

She twists the pink paper of the telegram about in her hands, smiling sardonically. Thirty thousand pounds in Consols, and a chapel in Mayfair! On the whole and nicely balanced, which has been most lucrative, the pulpit eloquence or the drawing-room rant?

The question is not decided in her turbid mind when, towards seven o'clock in the evening of a

noble September day, the carriage sent to fetch her turns in at the Trent lodge gates.

Memory recalls her last return, the evergreen arches and beribboned poles, erected to glorify that marriage which she had resented with a vigour of bitterness that now seems disproportioned to the cause. Will there be poles and arches for her and Randal?

The house has come in sight by now, and she rubs her eyes. Is this the answer to her acrid, inward question? Over the last gate there is an arch of summer boughs, blossom-decked between, and bearing on its summit in large red letters on a white ground the inscription "Welcome home!"

A slight pang shoots across her. The Kergouets must be here again. The trophy has been put up in their honour. "Welcome *home*" indeed! Well, that is something like impertinence!

The hall, when she enters it, is empty, and the servants tell her that the whole of the party are out on the cricket-ground; and thither she presently pursues them. The way leads through the flower-garden, on which, after the strenuous heat of the day, the dews are beginning their noiseless fall.

She stops to admire the arrangement of colour that had been the result of her own taste—the superb cannas; the stalwart *Hyacinthus candicans*, that show what lilies-of-the-valley would be if they grew in Brobdingnag; the flagged glory of gladioli; the splendid geraniums, arched and trained over wickerwork till they simulate hillocks of scarlet and rose—everything that is blazing, feathery, aromatic.

She moves through it all with a creator's com-

placency. The garden is even better than it was last year. Above it the sky arches, imitating its gaudiness in the tints of her westward fires, and flinging little plumes of carnation unexpectedly high and far into the empyrean.

She walks through a world of blessed suavity, fragrance, cool hush; and as she does so the boon air wraps her round in a mantle of peace, and the little jar caused by the arch and its inscription dies out. It would be pleasant to come home, and to design such another garden for next year, if only——

The “if only” does not apply to Marie this time.

The cricket-ground lies in the park, not far outside the garden bounds, from which a belt of shrubbery hides it. It is her ear which first informs her that she is nearing the objects of her quest.

Yes, the Kergouets are here. That squeal is unquestionably Louis's, and Sybil is pinching him. The verification of her forebodings does not annoy her nearly so much as she would have expected. In fact, the memory of the young Kergouets' habitual bursting into her sanctum and destroying its privacy flashes across her with a sense of relief. In the future, as in the past, these vulgar romps may be her best ægis.

The match is over, and the stumps drawn, as the little stream of people, advancing from the tent where Lettice herself has so often sat scoring through a summer day, proves.

The two girls are the first to espy her, and, galloping up, fling themselves upon her with a shock of affection so violent as almost to bring her to

earth; Louis tries to kiss her hand, for which mark of civility he is at once counselled by his sisters to "get out;" and little Frank more successfully attains her neck.

By this time the rest of the party have come up. Marie drops the arm of a man in flannels—who is not Jim—to wave a shut parasol round her head as a sign of welcome which her sister-in-law doubtfully hopes is not ironical, and Jim says—

"Here you are!"

Here she is undoubtedly.

Gabriel says nothing, and takes off his straw hat. Each one having greeted the newcomer in his or her fashion, there is a little pause.

"How long have you been here?" Miss Trent asks of one of her still closely attendant nymphs, more for the sake of breaking a silence which makes her feel unaccountably shy than for any other reason.

"How long?" repeats Muriel, heaving a colossal sigh. "Oh, do not let us count; it makes it go faster if we count."

"We have arrived exactly a week ago," says Louis, Frenchily.

"A week! Then how fresh your arch has kept!"

"*Our* arch?"—in several voices.

"Yes, the one over the gate near the hall door."

"But that is *your* arch," bursts out Sybil, while her juniors follow suit with the same words. "We put it up in honour of *you*. Marie made us."

"*Marie!*"

The recipient of this most unexpected honour cannot help the stupefaction of her voice, nor stifle the prick of remorse at her own angry inward com-

ment upon the impertinence of the "Welcome home." It was to her, then, that these words were addressed.

"It kept the children out of mischief, and—and it was chiefly Gabriel's idea," replies Mrs. Trent, with a most unwontedly sheepish air, and, for the first time in Miss Trent's knowledge of her, looking thoroughly out of countenance.

Lettice stands for a moment dumbfounded; then, seeing a look of upbraiding negation shoot from the brother's dark eyes towards his sister, she yields to a sudden impulse.

"I do not believe it. I believe that it was a kind thought of your own," she says, and so steps up and kisses her.

It would be difficult to say whether the giver or receiver of this caress is most covered with confusion by it. They all move on homewards, the young ones skirmishing ahead, around on the wings, everywhere, bear-fighting, boxing, yelling in their best manner. But Lettice only puts her hands to her ears good-humouredly once or twice.

Marie has taken possession again of her brother's arm—that arm which his family work so mercilessly hard—takes it with a little jealous air of monopoly which makes Miss Trent ask herself with a slight inward writhing of the spirit, "Does she imagine that I am likely to make any claim upon it?" But she checks the nascent hostility of the thought. This is the truce of God, and she will do nothing to break it. It is not broken even a little later, when the returned wanderer asks after Lulu, missing her sister-in-law's little wheezy appendage for the first time.

"Lulu is not here," replies Marie, shortly, turning away her face.

"Not here?"

"She will never vex you again by walking about the dinner-table," returns the other, flashing round in tearful anger at Lettice's slowness of comprehension.

The latter does not take up the grossly unprovoked challenge. On the contrary, a pang of remorse shoots across her. So the poor old professional beauty is dead. Miss Trent has had dear dogs of her own to mourn, and it is a grief that she can well enter into. But Marie will never believe in her regret in the face of all the unkind comments she had put into Kirstie's muzzled mouth upon the departed. It is therefore to Gabriel that she naturally turns with the ejaculation—

"Poor dear Lulu! I am so sorry!"

There is a sound of light flying steps—they are in the hall by this time—and Marie is gone.

"She cannot yet bear to hear the poor old dog mentioned," says Gabriel, half apologetically. "You see, it was our mother's."

His voice sinks reverently as he names the dead frailty who had been so well loved. Two tears stand in the girl's eyes.

"I wish you could make her believe that I *am* sorry."

The thought flashes across his memory of how at Wimbledon he had made her weep. Then he had not seen her tears, she had only told him of them; now they shine before him, like dew on violets. How infinitely that moist compassion becomes her!

"I am sure that you were never unkind to her," he says, gravely consoling.

She shakes her head, unalterably sleek and neat after a whole day's dusty wayfaring.

"I made Kirstie the mouthpiece of my own ill nature about her."

They both laugh a little over this confession of crime. Then, the friendly topic exhausted, there falls a silence between them.

The intensity of his admiration for her has always made him shy of her, and now he catches at any speech lest she should find his dumbness too eloquent.

"I am afraid you will not credit it, but the putting up that arch really was entirely Marie's idea."

"Is it possible?"

There is an almost awed incredulity in her voice, which to any one unacquainted with the circumstances would seem absurdly out of proportion to the cause.

"*Indeed* it is. She was exceedingly keen about it; it was all her own thought."

His asseveration is so extremely earnest that a spice of humour which in anybody else would be coquetry flavours her rejoinder.

"You repudiate all the share she tried to saddle you with in the welcome."

For the life of him he cannot help looking full at her for one moment in answer, and the rebuke—for it is one—sends her hurrying on.

"Then why did she deny it?"

He looks down reflectively, and there is a touch of pitying tenderness in his voice.

"Poor Marie! I think she was ashamed to own it."

"It is always our *good* actions of which we are ashamed," replies she, with a streak of her pet preachiness, which is redeemed by the April smile that conveys the truism.

Miss Trent has not thought it necessary to inform her betrothed of the exact day of her return home, nor has any one yet mentioned him. She can hardly believe in her own good fortune when, coming down to dinner, she looks round the drawing-room apprehensively, but sees no trace of the long black figure and the passionate white face, which during the last six months have turned for her from a dream to a nightmare.

"Is—any one coming to dinner?" she asks, rather consciously of Marie, who, astonishing to relate, is already down and flitting restlessly about.

At first Lettice thinks her sister-in-law cannot have heard the question, for there is a few seconds' delay before her nonchalant answer comes.

"Do you mean the Taylors? No, she has got a *head*, and Mr. Taylor—poor man, there had been such a long interval since the last that he was beginning to be afraid his glory had departed—would not leave her."

She laughs with averted face.

"You were not thinking of the Taylors, I expect," says Jim, sagaciously; "you meant Chevening? Of course you told him you were coming home to-day?"

His sister's guilty head shakes almost imperceptibly. Her guilty eye meets another, not her brother's, an eye full of what cannot really be the apprehension it looks like.

"Oh, that accounts for it," rejoins Jim, with not much attempt to disguise his astonishment at

methods of courtship so widely different from what had been his own. "I thought the vicar must be mistaken when he told me Randal had chosen to-day to run over to Swyndford to thank the duchess."

"What have you done to your thumb?" breaks in Marie, coming to a brusque halt before her sister Sybil, one of whose members is tied up in a way that betrays its having been in the wars.

"I sliced a bit of the top of it off cutting a turnip," replies the young creature, with the most unaffected indifference.

"She is obstinate to eat raw turnips and carrots," cries Louis, flushing with pleasure at this opportunity of showing up his persecutor-in-chief, "although Mr. Haines tells her that if she persists she will be full of worms."

His sister regards him with an eye promissory of future payment in full.

"That is what I wish," she says resolutely. "I wish to be full of worms."

This appalling sentiment gains a well-deserved box on the ear for the wounded heroine from her married sister, and Louis obtains a milder form of the same recompense from his elder brother, and then they all troop into dinner, nobody a penny the worse.

The Kergouets always eat and drink to the sound of their own loud trumpets and shawms; nor is the family music at all deteriorated in quantity or quality since Lettice last heard it. Through the customary din she finds some difficulty in making Jim hear the numerous questions that his own badness and Marie's non-existence as a corre-

spontent impel her to ask as to the couple's history since she parted from them. That they had had a spell of London, shortened by Marie's having racketed herself into illness, she already knows; but there are naturally many details to be filled in, and in order to obtain information upon them she presently finds herself bawling almost to the diapason of the rest of the company. Her inquiries as to the one absent member of her in-law's family she purposely addresses to that "in-law" herself.

"How and where is——" She hesitates for a second. A perverse pride has always hitherto prevented her speaking of or to Esmeralda by her Christian name; to inquire after her now as "Miss Kergouet" would be to break the truce of God. A blessed evasion occurs to her just in time. "How is Miss Poppy Delafield?"

There could not have been a happier question. All except Gabriel answer at once.

"She is touring in the provinces with Crawley. He has given her the juvenile lead. She is playing at Glasgow to crowded houses. She has had wonderful press notices. Marie has pasted them all into a book; Lettice shall be shown them after dinner."

This last piece of information, with its appended promise, is uttered only by the juniors; nor can Marie tame her excited high voice enough to hinder Miss Trent from plainly overhearing the "You shall do nothing of the kind; she would not care a straw about them," which is meant to be a whispered rebuke to the too expansive maidens.

"I do not call that kind of Marie," says Miss Trent, turning with a heightened colour to her left-hand neighbour, Marie's eldest brother. "I

should like to see them. They"—with a little touch of malice—"would remind me of Miss Snellicci and Miss Ledrook."

"Do you call that quite kind?" he retorts, with an answering spirit for which she does not think the worse of him.

This is the nearest approach to a crack that the truce of God receives throughout the evening.

"We have seen next to nothing of Randal lately," says Jim, stirred into more communicativeness than usual by the little fillip of his sister's advent, "except in the pulpit, where he has been giving us some pretty stiff pieces of his mind"—with a comfortable laugh. "He is a queer chap. When first we came down he was never out of the house, morning, noon, or night, was he, Marie?"

Mrs. Trent's elbows are, as is her usual culpable fashion, on the dinner-table, and instead of answering she lays one cheek on her folded hands, and turns completely sideways towards her father.

Jim repeats the appeal as he always does in the case of his fly-away partner, slowly and patiently until she answers him.

"Was he, Marie?"

His wife jerks herself round. "I did not hear what you were talking about;" then resolutely re-buries herself in conversation with her parent.

"Why did she say that?" asks Lettice of Gabriel, her blue eyes widely opened in astonishment at so gratuitous a lie. "She heard perfectly."

CHAPTER XXIII

SHE does not exactly repeat the question to him later in the evening when he joins her on the garden bench, to which the excessive beauty of the night has guided her.

The young Kergouets always consider that time spent in sleep, time spent in study, time spent indoors, and time misspent are synonyms. They have flung themselves into the perfumed twilight the moment that the end of dinner, abridged by them with Bohemian ease, lets them loose.

Lettice had not expected to be joined by Gabriel, whom she had imagined pinned for the evening to a reading-lamp, the papers, and his father.

"You have skimmed your duties," she says to him, letting fall the arms which have been lifted to clasp hands behind her head, and sitting up, being much too conventional to loll except in solitude; but there is nothing unwelcoming in her tone.

"He went to bed; the heat tires him."

The young man gives the little piece of information with no indication, as Marie would certainly have done, of being aware that it will not interest the person to whom it is addressed, and Miss Trent is determined not to be behindhand in magnanimous politeness.

"He looks better than he did at Easter. I have been telling him so."

Their eyes meet in the moonlight, hers rather

ashamed of her condescension, his trying not to betray how plainly he sees her wings growing. They sit silent for a moment or two, she absently marvelling at the moonlit stature of the Harrisi lilies, he with head thrown back, and absently straying among the planets.

The girl's voice has an uncertain note in it when she next speaks.

"Has it ever struck you that Marie is—not—very fond of—Randal?"

She jibs at the Christian name; yet to call her avowed *fiancé* "Mr. Chevening" would be to smack too much of the vicaress and her incorrigible "Mr. Taylor."

His answer, when it comes, seems scarcely worth the thinking over he spends on it before it appears.

"What has given you that impression to-night especially?"

"You noticed her manner at dinner?" she answers shortly.

Again he pauses, head still thrown back, and eyes travelling along the Milky Way.

"Even supposing that she does not, will it affect you very much in the future?"

Lettice laughs dryly. "You mean that there would be a want of balance in her preferring the husband to the wife; that it is better that her partiality should be evenly divided between us!"

He turns round upon her with Marie's own swift ire.

"That speech is in your earlier manner."

She accepts his rebuke with a repentant gentleness unlike herself.

"Yes," she says, "you are right, and a very dis-

agreeable manner it was, too; and what is more, it does not at all represent my real attitude of mind. To-night"—looking slowly round, and opening her nostrils luxuriously to take in the universal fragrance—"I feel in love and charity with everybody—almost."

His heart throbs wildly at the limiting adverb. To whom is her mental application of it?

"*Almost!*" he repeats half under his breath.

"Yes," she answers. "You know that there never yet was an amnesty without its exceptions."

Her clear eye glitters sternly in the silvered light. He cannot know what a potent temptation is assailing her to tell him who the exception is. She will not do it, and to-morrow morning the idea will look incredible; but to-night, here among the unearthly lilies, there is untold ease and relief in the mere thought of its possibility.

"I must apologize; but you cannot object to my coming up so late once in a way."

Both interlocutors start violently. Neither has heard the step of a man—he must have crossed the noiseless grass instead of the creaky pebbles—coming up behind them. Has he suddenly appeared to rescue himself from the ignominy of those lowering confidences about him? Can he have overheard them, though unuttered? Is that the explanation of the start he, too, gives—a start superior in violence to their own—as he ranges up opposite them?

"*Lettice!*"

"Why such surprise?" she asks, the sudden shock of his bodily presence lending a tremulous tartness to her greeting. "Did you think it was my ghost?"

Inwardly she is saying, "Thank God he did not find me alone here in the moonlight! Thank God that Gabriel is here!"

"I—I did not know that you were back," says Chevening, with an apparently uncontrollable agitation which his lady-love attributes to the companionship in which he has found her. "You never told me."

His voice drops as if to rescue the reproach from the intrusive ears of the third person.

"For whom did you take me?" asks she, hurriedly, having no very good answer for his upbraiding. "To whom did you think you were apologizing—to Marie?"

Randal is apparently too much occupied in conveying by his always expressive eyes to the other young man that he considers him to belong to the grand old Norman family of De Trop to answer.

Gabriel takes the hint, not because he is at all frightened by the curate's scowl, but because he is a believer in fair play.

Lettice sees him go with a sinking heart. Involuntarily she sketches a movement towards entrenching herself in the corner of the seat, by piling the superfluous wraps which the servants have brought out on the space beside her.

"Is it against me that you are building up that barrier?" he asks, with an odd laugh. "Why did not you erect it a little earlier?"

She rears her throat in silent scorn of the insinuation.

"It is as little necessary now as it was a quarter of an hour ago," he says, with an indignation which

she cannot but own has a certain just basis. "I force my caresses upon no one."

Doubtless it is but a trick of her own shamed imagination; but Miss Trent reads in this speech a reference to the time when *her* caresses were forced upon *him*. Humbled, as always, by any allusion to that dreadful epoch, she holds out a troubled olive branch.

"I should have let you know the date of my return, only that I felt sure you would learn it here."

"I have not been near the place for a week," he answers sullenly. "What should bring me here?"

The recollection of her brother's phrase, "morning, noon, and night," as applied to the earlier part of Lettice's absence, flashes back on her puzzled mind.

"Jim said that of late they had not seen much of you; but that previously you had been here a good deal."

The young man has sat down, contracting himself ostentatiously into the opposite corner of the seat. He stoops now to pick up a pebble and aim it viciously at one of the noiseless winged denizens of the night, as it swoops by in that unpleasant and unasked proximity which characterizes the flitter-mouse.

"I suppose," he says unreadily, "that we are all prone to haunt the spots where our best hopes lived and died."

The key is one of deep but unreproachful melancholy. And a pair of pincers, as so often before, takes a nip out of her conscience. *She* was that best hope. It is to *her* grave that he has been

bringing the funeral flowers of his wilted heart, and acrid memories! "Morning, noon, and night." Poor, *poor* Randal!

"I have been away from home too."

"Yes," she cries, making a great effort to lift the conversation up into a lighter and less oppressive zone, "I know. You have been returning thanks for one of your many new blessings. What a *cornucopia*!"—holding up her hands, then beginning to check off on her fingers. "Appleton."

"You may leave Appleton out," he says contemptuously. "I have at least escaped that form of decent sepulture."

"You have refused it?"

"Absolutely."

"And Tyburn Chapel? You have not refused *that*?"

She cannot help the satiric touch, which he, being unfortunately over-well versed in her tones, instantly detects.

"Why should I?"

"Why indeed?"

She leans her head back on the bench, as Gabriel had done, and her troubled eyes travel along the same star-sown highway as his. Across it she sees written in letters of flame her life forecast of nine months ago, and its ironical fulfilment of to-day. To walk beside an apostle along rough roads, holding his tired hand and strengthening him to blow the silver trumpet of his Evangel in the dark places of the earth—that was the forecast! To be the appanage of a fashionable preacher, while he titillatingly lashes smart bonnets, and flourishes on freely taken sittings—this is its fulfilment!

While they so sit, each chewing the cud of his and her bitter thoughts, a noise of nearing laughter reaches their ears, of chattering voices and skipping steps; and from the shadow of a clump of lime trees a group of three girls, or young women, presently emerges, affectionately entwined and dancing along. The middle one, when they are near enough to be identified, is seen to be Marie; but her supporters on either side are not her sisters, as their rough laughs and wildly cockney accents plainly proclaim. As their capering steps bring them up to the solemn occupants of the bench Marie cries out—

“Come and have a dancing lesson. These are two of my club girls, Florrie and Beatrice. There are six more somewhere about—oh!” suddenly recognizing Randal, and with a startling change of tone—“it is you, it it? I took you in the distance for—my brother.”

The young man has stood up, and now bows with an exaggerated courtesy.

“Unintentional compliments are always the most valuable.”

“The moon was behind a cloud, or I could not have made such a mistake,” she answers in a voice perfectly unknown to Lettice; which has neither sparkle nor playful jibe in it, and so turns on her heel, and walks off between her two *protégées*, with no longer any frisky spring in her feet.

Lettice looks and listens in puzzled dismay. How acutely Randal and Marie dislike each other! What immense strides their reciprocal aversion has taken during her own absence! Yet when alone, later on, she reckons up the evening's gains and

losses, she cannot help feeling that the account stands more in her favour than she could have hoped. Though she and Chevening had continued sitting on their bench for an hour after Marie's irruption, she had succeeded in staving off any and all of those amorous onsets, the mere apprehension of which had kept her shudderingly wakeful through many previous nights.

After all, now she comes to think of it, there had been nothing to stave. Her first action of piling the wraps had given the key-note, and he had religiously kept to it. He has really shown a great deal of delicacy. When a man is a thorough gentleman, you always know how to deal with him. And yet restless unhappiness, balked yearning, straining rebellion, had spoken in every line of that haggard face. Tame and commonplace, as in rare moments of self-abasement she calls herself, how has she managed to light such volcanic fires in such a man? Once the knowledge had filled her with reverent gratitude, now it inspires in her nothing but a sense of iron-clamped responsibility and leaden dread. Those terrible eyes! How can the fine ladies admire them! "Morning, noon, and night?"

* * * * *

September is our steadiest friend among the year's twelve daughters, with their varied whimsies, the one that oftenest plays the fairy godmother, and seldomest the scolding shrew. She is no exception to her golden rule this year. Not once are the young Kergouets reduced to playing "Bears" in the passages, or turning Lettice's discreet maiden bower into a robber's cave. They have

more time, more spare energy, than at Easter—since there are now no rehearsals to distract them—for the prosecution of their terrible industries. Yet after a day or two it is clear to Lettice that they do much less mischief than on their former visit. They chip bits out of themselves, and fall down through trap-doors and off ladders quite as freely as ever; but a quietly quelling word and eye successfully check that havoc wrought on his earthly goods which their good-natured brother-in-law had on the former occasion let pass in smiling, if regretful, patience.

Gabriel is the one person in the world admirably confessed by his family to be able and willing to tackle Sybil. And to “tackle Sybil” when she is as much above her boots, according to her relatives’ lenient phrase, and as determined to hoist her compeers above them as she is throughout this festal period, is no sinecure.

Marie is madly, wildly gay too, introducing her club girls—of whom six dance in a ballet and two make jams, and with all of whom you may count upon being more intimate than you quite wish within two minutes of your introduction to them—right and left, to her startled friends in the village: to Miss Smith, Miss Brown, and Miss Delamothé; to shy Mrs. Fairfax and excited Mrs. Taylor, who has a racy feeling of being a frequenter of green rooms for ever after.

It is a standing marvel to Lettice how her sister-in-law can endure and even enjoy the lavish endearments of these demonstrative young ladies.

“Marie is the only real Radical I have ever known,” she says one day to Gabriel, in a tone of

troubled wonder, as she watches Florrie and Beatrice and Ada and May Violet clustered round their hostess, and handling her hat, her hair, her trinkets, without any opposition on her part.

"She is no great respecter of persons, is she?" he answers. "She loves humanity, soaped or unsoaped."

"I am some way from that," rejoins Lettice, with an agreeable sense of virtue in confessing an imperfection which she has not the smallest intention of correcting. "I snubbed May Violet only this morning for poking her dirty fingers into my back hair, to find out if I wore a pad."

"I was privileged to see and hear you." And they both laugh.

The truce of God still lasts, and the occasional chips it sustains no more impair its integrity than do the barking of Sybil's shins or the three-cornered pieces daily hammered and gouged and gimletted out of her flesh lessen that young lady's enjoyment. Perhaps it runs the greatest peril when Miss Kirstie, emboldened by having drawn blood from Sybil's leg without anybody—least of all the sufferer—seeing any cause to object, unwisely proceeds to sample the infant calves of little Frank. Or perhaps it is in still greater danger when Muriel, exhibiting her phonograph at a village entertainment, at which Lady Clapperton is present, unluckily puts in the cylinder which records in Louis's voice that "Lady Clapperton is a giraffe in coronation robes!" It is only by a miracle that the squeaky insult does not reach the ears of its object.

There is nothing odd in the fact that incidents

such as these should produce some smart sparring. What does strike Lettice as odd is the way in which she has more than once found Marie surreptitiously regarding her. There is no hostility in the look, only investigation, questioning, anxiety. Could she overhear a conversation that takes place between Mrs. Trent and her eldest brother about a week after her return, she might gain some enlightenment. They have been strolling together silently before dinner, after a long day's cricketing, when Marie speaks abruptly.

"You are worrying yourself badly over this."

"Aren't you?"

There is an unwonted sharpness in the tone.

"Of course I am; fretting myself to fiddle-strings! But what is the use of fretting? You—you do not think that she guesses—that she is beginning to suspect?"

"How should she?"

"She is never very quick at seeing things. *I* should have found out in one second."

A slight quiver running through the arm—the hard-worked arm on which she leans—tells Marie that even this slight disparagement is too much for the hearer's patience.

"Do you think she will mind much?"

"*Mind!*" The arm drops hers with a vigorous jerk, and its owner faces her with his whole pale face on fire. "*Mind*, when she discovers that the man whom she supposes to be hers heart and soul, who ought never to be off his knees in gratitude for having had the unspeakable good fortune to win her, should have——"

A feverish little hand comes with a smack across his lips, and cuts off the end of the sentence.

"You shan't say it! I won't hear it!"

After a tempestuous pause, with a return of the old sisterly jealousy—

"Of course to you it seems *incredible!*"

Gabriel is much too miserable to reply, which his sister perceiving, remorsefully rubs her cheek up and down the sleeve of his jacket. Desisting, she says in a horrified voice—

"All the same he will marry her, if some one does not stop it. Some one ought to tell her."

"*Who?* God forbid that any one should know it except you and me, and the information would not come very well from either of us."

There is the bitter distress in his accents of one who sees no outlet from a hopeless strait. Neither does she apparently; and it is he who presently speaks again.

"Were you thinking of *Jim?*"

She gives a prodigious start, her whole little nervous body in revolt.

"*Jim*, not for worlds! I won't have my old Freak worried; and besides"—laughing hysterically—"he would never think me infallible again."

Both walk on a few paces, with heads dejectedly drooping.

"I told you you would have trouble with that—man."

"What is the good of reminding me of that *now?*" she cries, all her nerves on edge, and throwing her head about as if to dislodge some odious occupant from her brain. "Who could have guessed it? Among all the men I had ever met—

and you know they were not few—I had never come across one I was not quite equal to managing. How could I know that this—this reptile was an exception? A clergyman, too! Faugh!”

A meditation upon the Christian graces of the Rev. Randal Chevening keeps both suffocated for a while.

“She has certainly every reason to bless our family!” says Gabriel, first recovering speech, but of a low and choking sort. “What more is there left that we can rob her of? Home, position, brother, and now——”

It is almost the first taste of his rare severity that Marie has ever in her life experienced, and it flings her into a passion of tears.

“If I have robbed her of *her* brother, she has certainly robbed me of mine.”

To her consternation, she perceives that he is beyond being affected by her agitation.

“You know that you are talking nonsense,” he answers gently, but coldly.

She clings about him in an absolute panic. “Say that you don’t think it was my fault. Say that you do not think I was to blame.”

With fever-trembling hands she pulls his face round, compelling him to look into the wet wells of her great eyes; and he, yielding to the lifelong habit of protecting affection, puts his arm round her waist.

“No,” he says ruefully; “I believe that, as far as intention goes, you were perfectly innocent.”

Once again they are silent, wedged in that issueless *impasse*. Once again Gabriel takes the initiative.

"There is no time to lose," he says, not chokingly this time, but in a key of dogged resolution. "Something must be done to save her. Even—her worst enemy could not wish her such a fate."

"You were going to say 'even *you*,'" replies his sister, deeply wounded. "Oh, how unjust you are to me; and I was growing quite fond of her."

"Were you?" he says, a sudden inspiration lighting up flambeaux in his glowing eyes. "Then prove it. Tell her!"

"Kill me at once!" cries Marie, theatrically seizing the lappels of her white serge jacket, and tearing them apart, as if to offer her heart to the fraternal penknife. "I had far rather die. Sooner than do it, I *will* die!"

He turns from her, eluding her embrace. "Do not shake me off because I am merely human," she says, whimpering, and recapturing him. "Don't you see that, considering how we have always hated each other, it would be physically impossible for me to own to her that——"

She breaks off with a grimace of inexpressible distaste, resuming, after a moment or two, in a carneying key full of doubt and fright—

"Now, *you* have always been on good terms with her. It would come much better from *you*."

At that he shakes her off like a viper.

"From *me*? Do you know what you are saying? If I had the boundless impertinence to interfere, what would she—what *could* she think, but that I was traducing him for—for my own ends?"

"Very well, then," replies Mrs. Trent, desperately, beginning to run off towards the house, "then there is no help for it. She must marry

him, and make the best of a bad bargain, as many other women have done before her."

Her brother remains standing where she had left him in the gathering dusk, his hands, nervous as her own, tormenting each other.

"If there is no other way——" he groans, lifting to the just appearing luminaries above him a face in which there are more lines than are accounted for by his years. Later he adds under his breath, "Surely the bitterness of death is past!"

CHAPTER XXIV

EVEN now that she has returned to his orbit, Mr. Chevening is not able to pursue the courtship of his betrothed as sedulously as might have been expected. Besides the work naturally entailed upon him by his imminent departure and the engagements which his future cure already bring, he is threatened with a law suit by the relatives of the old lady who, in gratitude for the spiritual food with which he had fed her, has bequeathed him her loaves and fishes. Counsel assures the legatee—as is subsequently proved, rightly assures him—that the angry claimants have not a leg to stand on; but their ireful endeavours to prove that no one, except of unsound mind, could think a volume of sermons an equivalent for £60,000 Consols, give him a good deal of trouble.

When the lovers meet it is scarcely ever at the house or in the grounds of her home. Almost always he finds some pretext—mostly that of the impossibility of finding any privacy in the area scoured by the admirably efficient roughriders of Kergouet's Horse—for giving her a rendezvous in the woods or lanes.

Is it the publicity of their meeting-places that affords her that immunity from his embraces which strikes her with astonished thankfulness as too good to be true? Or is it that his pride still

remembers the defensive wall of wraps which on the first evening of her return she had built between them? She assigns it to the latter cause, and as she looks in his haggard face, or evades the dreadful light in his eyes, as she listens to his spasmodic speech, or sees him lapse into moody silence, her conscience smites her bitterly for the suffering that the painful fight for self-control entails upon him in the effort to suppress, for fear of offending her, all outward evidences of the passion that is eating out his vitals. Do the daily deepening marks of struggle on his face, the feverish fragmentariness of his speech, the absolute disappearance of all attempt at physical contact—even her hand hangs untouched by him—mean that he has realized the intensity of her own lothness, and that he is wrestling and agonizing to be enabled to renounce her? If he offers it, will she have any right to accept such a sacrifice—to blast him with a hopeless blight just at the opening of his career?

These are the questions that hammer with dismal reiteration against the wall of her brain as she sits beside him who is still her promised husband, beneath a not yet carried corn-stook, under the now needless chaperonage of the reapers, or saunters dolefully through the nutty woods.

One day, when she has been at home about a fortnight, Miss Trent finds herself at liberty from her triste promenade, Mr. Chevening having been summoned to Swyndford by his duchess to be presented to some of the fairest and fashionablest of his new flock at present visiting her. But for the perpetual obsession of her heavy thoughts Lettice would have had a pleasant day, and it is with an

almost happy look that she lifts her face from the drawing-board, on which she has been figuring forth the plan for next year's garden, to greet Gabriel, come back from shooting.

"Begonias here," she says, "white pansies and heliotrope here, coreopsis and red nasturtium here, and so on, and something tall and feathery in the middle of each bed."

She points with her paint-brush to the little dabs of colour that represent the prospective blooms, and he notes with rapture that she has a smirch of indigo on one cheek. Shall he tell her of it, and shock her militant neatness, or shall he let it stay to gratify his eye by its heightening of the "delicate lodgment" it has found? He decides on the latter course. She puts her paint-brush to her mouth, and says sententiously—

"A garden is the one really unmixed pleasure in life. There is nothing in the world at once so soothing and so cheering."

"Have you needed cheering?"

"Why should I?"—sharply.

Here is his opportunity, the opportunity that he has been vainly seeking for a week, and reproaching himself with his own cowardice in not making.

"You have looked—or I have imagined it—as if you had something on your mind."

She puts her paint-brush into her water-tin, and then into a cake of colour, with a deliberate movement whose calm is contradicted by the shaking of the brush in her fingers.

"I *have* something—a cart-load—on my mind," she answers in a low voice, "and sometimes I think I must unload it to—somebody, and then again I

am quite sure that I shall do nothing of the kind. Come, they have all been to tea at the Vicarage; shall we go and meet them?"

She rises, and puts her drawing implements hurriedly together, forgetting that the little pool of carmine on her palette has not been transferred to the *Phlox Drummondii* bed.

The resolution with which she waves aside the topic, and the determination to talk of nothing but *la pluie et le beau temps*, which she displays throughout their walk across the park, render it impossible for him to revert to a subject which she so pointedly shuns, and he sees that his first opportunity for doing what nothing but the most monstrous anomaly could ever have laid upon him as a duty to attempt is gone. He is, however, to be given a second one.

"Who are the two people colloquing at the gate?" asks Lettice, breaking off suddenly in the middle of a feverish commonplace, such as she has been pouring forth for the last half mile. "How the days are beginning to draw in already! Why, it is Randal"—with an intonation of surprise—"and Marie! I do believe"—laughing uneasily—"that they are quarrelling again! They really ought to be bound over to keep the peace. Oh, do not let us join them, or they will appeal to us"—turning hastily round, and beginning to retrace her steps. "I do dislike being drawn into quarrels that do not concern me."

Her companion looks at her with his heart in his mouth. Is it possible that she is still blind? that those eyes, clear as mountain brooks, can have seen in the livid face on the other side of the wicket

nothing but trivial dislike for an uncongenial acquaintance? His glance tells him that, inconceivable as it seems, impregnable in the fortified castle of her fixed idea, her eyes are still bound. It is for him to tear the bandage from them, and the moment has come.

"Has it ever struck you to—to ask him what they quarrel about?"

Miss Trent draws up her neck with a slight gesture of hauteur. What suitable words would have accompanied this mark of her displeasure will never now be known, for before she can utter them she is seized from behind by a pair of muscular young arms, which lift her an inch or two from the ground, and then drop her.

"Muriel bet me I could not lift you!" cries Sybil's voice, breathless and boastful. "What do you say now, *hein?*" Recovering her wind with creditable rapidity, she adds, "Why did not you come and fetch us, as you promised? You do not know what you *lost!* We got Mrs. Taylor into the swing. I thought she would '*crever*' with laughing."

"She feigned to be amused," says Louis, eager, as usual, to discount his tyrant's glories; "but in truth she wished you at the devil."

The wrangle lasts till they reach the house, and Gabriel's second opportunity is gone. Recognizing that it has done so, he slips back from the noisy group now enveloping Lettice to meet his sister. The young man has not many yards to go before he sees her hastening through the gathering gloom, which is not yet opaque enough to conceal the high state of agitation in which she is.

"He tracked me through the village," she says, breathing heavily. "He implored me to listen to him—to let him explain—apologize. I had to hold the gate against him."

She clenches her little hands, as if to repeat that potent resistance, the idea of which would in other circumstances have made the hearer smile.

"Did she see?"—in a panting half whisper. "Of course, she understands now? You shake your head. No? Is it possible that any one can be so thick-witted?"

The gathering dusk probably hides the wince evoked by this last query, for she gallops on with ever-swelling excitement.

"And you have not told her? You have shirked it again?"

His long schooling in self-control has, perhaps, never had a severer call upon it than that made by the grossness of this injustice; but it stands the strain. If his silence does not reproach her, his word certainly do not. In a minute she is lashing herself instead.

"What am I saying? Of course it is I that have shirked it; I that shall go on shirking it until it is too late. It is infamous of me to try to shift it on to you; but oh!"—by this time her little, hot, tragic face is buried in his chest—"you have carried so many loads for me. Do not you think that if you tried very hard you could carry this one too?"

All through the evening Gabriel seeks for that third opportunity, which, once grasped, he is resolute not again to let slip. The person who must afford it to him seems, however, as determined to

elude as he to gain it. Fine as the evening is, infinitely tempting with its programme of stars and scents, she refuses all invitations to go into the garden, and sits beside a table with her large-lidded eyes for the most part dropped upon a piece of plain work, steadily sewing, an image of dainty housewifely decorum. The table is that upon which old Mr. Kergouet's reading-lamp stands, and only by its width is she parted from Gabriel's father, thus unconsciously employed as a lightning-conductor. He is the only other occupant of the room, and his son's eyes keep turning with stealthy impatience to a neighbouring clock, as if to hasten the arrival of that early hour at which his invalid habits send the parent Kergouet to bed. But to-night that parent has no intention of retiring. Emoustillé by the presence of his handsome and at least negatively civil neighbour, he bestirs himself to pay her timorous compliments upon her scissors, her thimble, her reels of cotton, and the faded satin and mother-of-pearl fittings of her old-world sandal-wood work-box.

When half an hour beyond his usual tether has been given him, the son, unable any longer to govern his impatience, interposes.

"Father, do you know that it is eleven o'clock?"

Docile as ever to his offspring's admonitions, the senior rather unwillingly draws himself out of his easy-chair. To the son's infinite annoyance, Miss Trent rises too, and departs, bidding both men a grave good-night.

As Gabriel's balked eyes follow the tall white dignity crossing the hall, he sees the butler giving

her a rather bulky letter, which has apparently come by hand. She does not pause to open it, but pursues her upward way. Had Gabriel known that that insignificant-looking missive would save him for ever from the hideous necessity for finding a "third time," he would have slept better than he did.

* * * * *

Lettice is in no hurry to open her letter. Recognition of the handwriting in which it is addressed forbids all anticipations of possible pleasure in its perusal. She idly wonders, when at last, having purposely loitered over her undressing, she breaks the seal, why it is sealed? What makes it so big?

The answer comes quickly in a little shower of notes and letters—a very little one. A single glance tells her that they are of her own inditing, the scanty crop of correspondence spread over the months of her engagement.

Marie had called her thick-witted, and for the first moment or two the significance of their homecoming does not reach her. Then it dawns hastily upon her. When an engagement is broken off, letters and presents are sent back.

What does it mean? She snatches up the one sheet—two sheets, which are not in her own, but in Randal's handwriting, and begins to read—though at first the lines mix and dance and overlap each other.

"Though I have forfeited all right to care, I cannot even now help a pang of agony at the knowledge that the sight of your own returned letters—you cannot reproach yourself with having been too prodigal of them—and what it implies, will fill

you with relief and joy. Yes, you are set free. I have forfeited all claim to you. By the time you read this I shall have gone out of your life for ever. You have never loved me; not even at that moment when you offered me your cold lips, which for once seemed warm and human. If you had loved me, it might have been different. Together we might have conquered the devil within me, for I have struggled—I have! I have! I might have come out of the contest with victory, instead of as now, in utter shameful defeat.”

The words wander across the page, half illegible; but even if they were printed in the clearest type they would for the moment carry no meaning to the dazed reader. What does it mean? What is it all about? Has he gone mad? She catches up the sheet which in her bewilderment she has let half slip through her fingers, and her eyes devour the page that may—that must bring the elucidation of this horrible mystery.

“I have succumbed to that temptation which assailed me the first moment I saw her!”

Then, at last, the bandage is loosened from Lettice's eyes; the scales fall from them, and she sees. It is Marie, *Marie, Marie!* She tears along.

“A fortnight ago, forsaken by you, by God, and hounded on by the raging fiend within me, I went mad, and spoke. I had no excuse, no palliation. I knew, I know now that she loathes me, and yet I spoke.”

The latter phrases are barely decipherable. She can no longer gallop. She must crawl.

“Every day since your return I have expected you to ask me the reason of the miserable change

that, as none knows better than I, has been patent to every one but you. But cold, pure, and unimaginative, slow to suspect, slow to see, you have apparently—inconceivable as is such blindness—perceived nothing. Well, at all events, you will see now.”

Then follows a dash and break. Is that all? No, on another sheet there is still something.

“In one respect I can allay the fears that I know will assail your piety. I shall not remain in Holy Orders, but shall leave the Church which I have disgraced.”

There is no signature, nor any ending.

When one's world turns topsy-turvy, and one finds one's self sitting on one's head, it is no great wonder if one's ideas are at first a little *brouillés*, and for some while the darkness of chaos reigns in the girl's brain. Then gradually, in glimmerings, in shafts, and finally in a dazzling deluge, light pours in upon her. How inconceivably blind she has been! *Marie!* One after one, then in troops, then in armies, the indications, hints, incidents, looks, words, which should have enlightened her, march up and storm her memory. *Marie!* The haggard, havocked face, the disconcerted speech, the gloomy silences, the waste of flesh, even the dreadful fervour of the kisses had all been for *her*.

A pang of unavoidable humiliation and self-contempt at having ever imagined that attractions so moderate, and a nature so commonplace as hers could light such volcanic fires, flashes first across her; but soon gives way to a worthier pain. Is this what the apostle, with whom, less than a year ago, she had seen herself prophetically climbing

spiritual heights, drawn up by him to ever loftier and loftier levels, has come to?

She had long known that he was not an apostle; that it was only her own slowness of apprehension and lack of intuition that could ever have thought him one; but that he should have sunk in this slough of sensual mire, without her own stupid eyes ever having detected that his feet were even remotely tending thither! If she had been fonder of him, could she have saved him?

The hours pass unnoted by her, as in seething confusion the images of the past course before her mental vision. In the absolute upheaval of her world, not only present and future are engulfed, but the past has been swallowed too. It has never existed as she had thought it.

One after one, she lives over the unreality of its scenes. Here and there a taper of truth has been held to her delusions, but she has always industriously blown it out. The stealthy anxiety with which Marie has scanned her face; Gabriel's obvious effort to give her some hint or warning;—how is it possible that she could have helped comprehending their meaning?

She gets up heavily from the seat before her dressing-table, at which she was sitting when the cataclysm overwhelmed her, and turns out the electric light. Darkness best matches such communings as hers, and the sight of her own distraught face in the toilet-glass irks her to madness.

Her whirling thoughts begin to roll in a new channel. Why does she feel no anger against Marie? Having deeply resented all the minor injuries inflicted on her by her sister-in-law, why does she, now that Marie has done her the most

grievous wrong that one woman can inflict on another, feel no animosity towards her? The problem repeats itself, with parrot-like sameness, through the sable hours, and only dawn brings the solution.

* * * * *

For once in her life Miss Trent is late for breakfast, her maid having found her in so beautiful a sleep as not to have the heart to disturb her.

When she at length, with trepidating anxiety as to the construction that will be put upon her tardiness, appears, she finds the Kergouet family gathered round Jim at the hall door, giving their opinions, with their usual vociferous freedom, upon the points and paces of a pony which is being looked at with a view to the reluctant Louis taking his first lessons in riding upon it. Time being non-existent for the Kergouet race, no one expresses surprise at her late appearance.

Little Frank runs up to her. "Randal is gone!" he cries, determined to proclaim his tidings before any other member of his family can get ahead of him, and with all that family's ease in the handling of Christian names. "The postman brought the news. When is he coming back?"

The recipient of this piece of news is tinglingly aware of a sort of shivering start on the part of two members of the group at this abruptly volleyed communication. The consciousness gives her back her composure. She puts her hand kindly on the child's head, and, looking over the top of it into two terrified pairs of eyes, says very gently—

"I think—*never!*"

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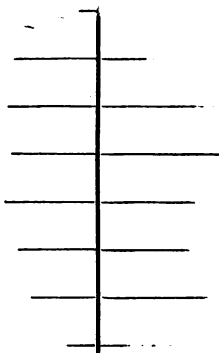
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